

JAYLIT

ISSUE 06
JAN 2024



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE



POETRY | SHORT STORIES | ESSAYS

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THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

The Journal of African Youth Literature (JAY Lit) is a grassroots initiative providing African youths with a platform to publish their writing. We also publish writing by other individuals that falls under the general theme of African youth. We publish content from across Africa in any languages used on the continent.

Please consult the [author guidelines](#) on the website carefully before submitting.

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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

In March 2019, I left a decade-long career in media and entertainment to chase my childhood dream of becoming an author. It was a year of in-pouring rejections. But it was also the year I stumbled on the submission guidelines of the *Journal of African Youth Literature (JAY Lit)* and sent in a short story titled 'When the Sun is Up'. The acceptance I received from the founder and Managing Editor at the time, Bronwyn Bowles-King, was only the second in my writing career, but the first place I was ever published was here. My story appeared in the first issue, released in January 2020. Also, I've served here as a talent recruiter, peer reviewer and editor since then, giving me such valuable experience as a literary enthusiast.

I'm sharing this story because this is four years later, and I have not only become a relatively recognisable figure in African literature since then, but I am also here, privileged to put together this issue of *JAY Lit* as Managing Editor. All this was inconceivable when I started out, and I couldn't see the slightest hint of an end to the tunnel of rejections I was wading through at the time.

I'm sharing this story because this is what *JAY Lit* is about. Since its inception, it has debuted young African writers in every issue, giving a platform for their voices to be heard, offering a hand of support to help grow their talent, and helping them believe that they can get out there and achieve much more than they can ever dreamt of before. This issue contains a new selection of young African awesomeness, with several returning authors as well as names that are as new to you as they are to us. They are not only from across the continent but also now from the African diaspora.

We are grateful to Femi Amogunla for a cover image that evokes such raw emotions, and to all our contributors for their amazing talent. These authors have written in English but also in native tongues like MbeMbe and isiXhosa. They share tales of loss, grief, pain, and heartbreak, but also of love, hope, and boundless possibilities. Their stories will transport you to the past, bring you back to the present, and shoot you headlong into the future. Their writing will remind you of what it means to be African. Their imagination will make you proud of that identity.

As a proud alumnus of this prestigious literary institution myself, I welcome you to the Class of *JAY Lit* Issue 6. We are young. We are bold. We are fearless. We are the future of African literature, and you, our esteemed readers, are an important part of our journey as you help yourself to these sumptuous pages. You're welcome to an amazing reading experience!

Ibrahim Babátúndé Ibrahim

JAY Lit Managing Editor

africanyouthliterature@gmail.com

JOIN OUR AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME

Would you be interested in helping us promote *JAY Lit* to other authors from your home country? If you want to see your country and home language represented in the Journal, being an Ambassador is a great way to make it happen! We want to address the following through this initiative:

- We receive few **submissions from nations outside South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa**. We are determined to change that and are seeking ways to reach other African writers. You can start simply by telling your friends on social media about the Journal.
- We want more **submissions that aren't in English**, though we welcome those too. Perhaps you can help us reach those who are writing or could write in languages such as Swahili, Chichewa, Zulu, etc. All African languages are welcome, as well as those spoken widely in certain regions such as French and Portuguese.
- We are also interested in the way youths mix and use various languages together in practice (**multilingualism**) and capturing that for **cultural preservation**.
- Another major challenge we face is **reaching rural areas**. Can you reach out to those in outlying areas in your country or region? Sharing info about *JAY Lit* with high schools, teachers, libraries, community forums, etc. in rural areas can ensure we are more inclusive and give opportunities to those in disadvantaged areas.

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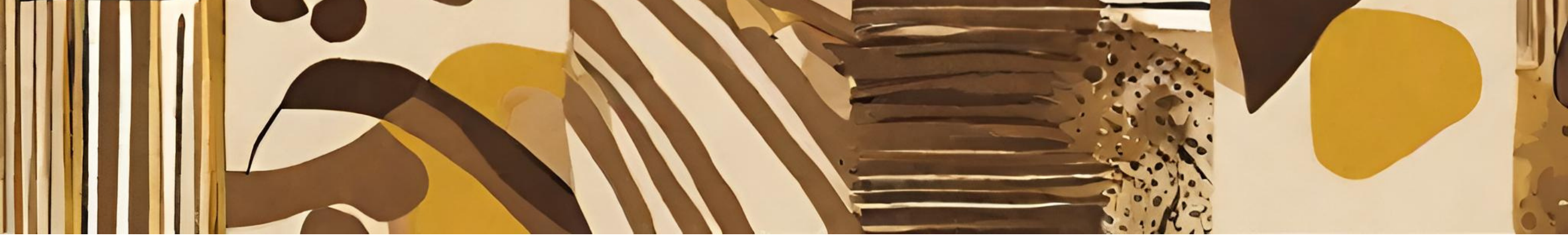
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THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

POETRY



Gabriel Awuah Mainoo



Gabriel Awuah Mainoo is a Ghanaian creative practitioner and an author of poetry books. His awards include the 2022 Singapore Poetry Prize, 2021 Africa Haiku Prize, 2021 LFP/RML/Library of Africa and the African Diaspora Chapbook Prize, among others. Mainoo is a recipient of the 2022 West African Writers Residency, the 2023 Transatlantic Relatives Residency, and a 2024 International Writers Workshop writer-in-residence at Hong Kong Baptist University. His work has been published in *The London Reader*, *FIYAH*, *Prairie Fire*, *EVENT*, and *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, among others.

Gabriel Awuah Mainoo

Firefly

Haiku for Maya Angelou

twilight...
a meteor leads
the slave-child home

night requiem
in Winston-Salem
the caged bird sings

in her dark
i picture the shackled thrush
fly into daybreak

soaking moon
how tender the widow
drenches the weather

moonlight jazz
the contrapuntal of a lark
deepening my blackness

Uaueza Kanguatjivi



Uaueza Kanguatjivi affectionately known as Poppy is a 26-year-old female born and raised in Windhoek, Namibia. She is a Triumphant College graduate who works as a journalist writing for local weekly newspaper, Confidente. She spends a lot of her free time writing and doing creative things, such as painting and drawing. Her poetry collection entitled 'A Place of Solace' is presented here.

Poetry collection: A Place of Solace

Fighting Battles

1 Corinthians 13:13
Abide by these three
Faith, hope and love
But the greatest of all is love

Every day a part of me dies
Every day a part of me lies
As I keep fighting battles my parents never won
Fighting battles without a sword
Fighting battles with these words. "faith."

Each day I say a prayer
As anxiety knocks on my door
And the colours red, yellow and blue
play over and over in her head "hope."
Will this madness ever stop?
Another life lost
Another brother, friend, sister, cousin hanging
over a rope because his friends thought
he was too cool to be depressed
and nobody ever heard his cries
Another gunned down
because they fear a Black man walking
making us anything smaller than we ought to be
like we aren't sons of this soil
withstanding the fact that BLACK LIVES MORE THAN MATTER

Each day a part of me dies
as the harbour takes away one of our girls
before she even gets to see and enjoy the seashore
And the media breaks out; #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS

Each day a part of me lies
as patriarchist ceaselessly catcalls
and I continuously act like I am partly deaf
because "Mamacita" "Holla my size" certainly ain't my name boy

Each day a part of me lies
as we fight for equal rights
with men who bluntly refuse to be our equals
as if the word man ain't in the word woman

Each day a part of me dies
as psycho-the-rapist
continues to walk these streets
because he needs to learn and unlearn
before he can be electrocuted because



because in today's world justice
justice is served on these platforms
before it's served in these chambers

Today a part of me died
because my people seem to have forgotten love
my people have become subjects
my people have been taken away from home
my people are victimised my people are hurting
My people are angry
My people are tired
My people are fighting
fighting battles our forefathers and
the fathers before them fought
Fighting systems
fighting battles that
really only "love" could overcome

I AM

I am the prodigy of Ubuntu
I am a child raised by a village
I am Uaueza of Omutombotjari
Born into the Land of the Brave
The land of great horizons
The land of the freedom fighters
and the struggle kids
The land of the ovambo damara-nama
ovaherero and the khoi-khoi brave
The land run by Christine Mboma and Beatrice Masalingi
The land where the desert meets the ocean

Uaueza Kanguatjivi

Abba's Girl

Like the woman caught in adultery
I stand at the altar waiting to be stoned
to death
Feeling vulnerable, helpless
I whisper deep prayers
wondering what this famous carpenter
would do if the crowd stoned me
after all
Guilty through and through
I feel it the stench of death and slavery

Just like the prostitute who sneaked into the Pharisee's home
And stand behind the Prince of Peace
I take a holy posture at his feet and weep
I long to bathe his feet with tears
Then dry them out with hair
To feel his forgiveness
His love
See it is the woman's communion with the Holy Spirit
Her shouting and moaning that provides shelter against the
wild wind of her fear of God
And like the Samaritan woman at the well
I've been married five times, the man I'm with now is not my husband
I'm kind of questioning this life-giving water
But, I no longer want to be thirsty
So I long for a sip
It's by the power of her faith
that she is sanctified
because of His amazing grace

So like the woman caught in adultery
I watch as the crowd walks away one by one
removing my shame with each dusty step
I hear his beautiful voice say
Neither do I condemn you
Now go and sin no more
I am Abba's Girl

Damian Carlton



Damian Carlton is an East African poet from Kenya. He is a polyglot who composes poems in different African languages, such as Shona, Zulu and Swahili, as well as in English. He has been previously published in *Poetry Potion* and took part in the St Petersburg Digital Art Residency during the 2020-2021 season.

Damian is also a spoken word artist, poet, and digital creative who uses digital media as a form of artistic and literary expression. His work centres on nature and the healing power of poetry. He has performed virtually in the UK, US, India, and South Africa. His work has been longlisted for the Emily Dickinson International Winter Poetry Contest Prize, and in 2020, he became a World Literacy Foundation Ambassador.

Damian Carlton

Lessons of luck to an African child

African child, learn that luck should be plucked
in ways fought and fickle
That bad fortune be avoided and ducked
As an infant I prayed that the god that was my mother benedicted me with
the story of how I came to be
And so Mother began:
Ojulegba your Papa called you like that crossroad trickster of old Legba
He and I were at odds when I miscarried your twin brother
How the odds turned in your favour, even so not for your brother,
I wanted an ivory name so I called you Ben but it was not good for your father
He wanted a saintly name he said that was his edict
The gods noted this, and a consensus arrived, you christened benedict
The winds sighed and you cried as you took to this smattering of identities
Of worlds and civilizations old and new
As we carried you home the rainy sky feasted on the bones of men till I
Saw
them
sinews
African child learn that luck should be plucked
in ways fought and fickle
That bad fortune be avoided and ducked
We stopped on the way until the rainwater abated, thanks to an Aqua-duct.

Faith Brown



Faith Brown is a 19-year-old aspiring writer based in Cape Town. They matriculated in 2022 and are currently pursuing a visual communications degree while exploring their passion for poetry through writing. Alongside their academic pursuits, Faith enjoys experimenting with fashion, spending quality time with loved ones, and immersing themselves in nature's beauty. Their feline companion, Luna, often provides them with a sense of comfort during their creative sessions.

The architecture of happiness

Fragility. Delicate and fragile.
Too soft to the touch of even a single dainty
fingertip

Romanticized. Romanticized and idealized.
So sought after, yet so enigmatic and hazy
like the sky when it weeps in longing for the
moon.

We yearn and lust after an intangible concept
in desperate pursuit of feeling something we
will never be ready to accept

Enticing. Enticing and addictive.
So much like the love she once shared with
them
Only to be left, brokenhearted yet again.

Intricate. Intricate and flawed.
Dark, detailed, depth in its imperfections
yet it still glimmers with its
silly little silver linings
evermore

So be careful, sweet creature
with the happiness you so strongly desire
as in the endless chase, you might find it
backfire.

Kaushar Edoo Bibi Auleear



Kaushar is a performance poet from the beautiful island of Mauritius. She started writing and performing slam poetry in 2019 during a local workshop. Poetry is now a way to voice her inner feelings. She hopes to influence and encourage the youth through her poems by delivering powerful messages. Being fluent in Creole, Bhojpuri, English, French, and Urdu allows her to express herself in different ways. However, Creole remains the most impactful language for her performances since it is her mother tongue. She takes pride in her country's rich in culture and diversity and strives to represent this in her words. She also believes that poetry has the power to change minds and inculcate positivity, which she tries to do whenever she is on stage.

Kaushar also goes by the name MisKa. You can follow her journey on Facebook at [Kaushar Edoo - MisKa](#)

Kaushar Edoo Bibi Auleear

Glory

They want us to be their glory
Shining a new story on facebook every day
Where Dark under eyes
Are just lies covered by concealer
Where foundation is my healer
My true skin colour
They don't wanna see
They chant about bright glowing skin
Day and night
They despise the smallest pimple
Dimples are what they admire
And an hourglass figure
That is the true power
To keep their eyes glued
On every sway of the hips
And do not forget to lay
Under the sun every day
To achieve the required tan
Real talks are banned
They do not want to hear about your achievements
Tell me more about your dress they say
And how many have got the opportunity to undress you
They ask
Privacy is not their legacy
They want us to be their glory
Shining a new story on facebook every day

Love handles

The number of love handles on my body
Does not impact my ability to handle love
Spread your eyesight
Beyond the limits
Of weight
Height
And cellulite
My fight is not against
The size of my clothes
I only strive
To grow my heart
Ignore my unsexy body
For a while
You will see a true self
You can talk for hours with
I promise a pure connection of hearts



Sunset

I have set my mindset
At the verge of the last sunset
I bet
You find it sad
You think it's bad
To live in despair
To think that life is unfair
Would you care less
If I loved a little more
Or if I roared a little less
I do not follow
What's best for me
You will find me below the last sunset
Trying to hold up the sun
For a little longer
Trying to satisfy my hunger
A little more
Is what we yearn for
So why does try for it
A little more
Until the last sun sets

The so called free

Yes we are free
If education gave wings
Then we are free
If a job provided independence
Then we are free
If maternity leaves gave us time
Then we are free
But before shining with glee
I invite you to have a round behind the scenes
If she is the only one who has to face the clatter of dishes
After returning home from work
Then she is not free
If she is still expected to be the only one staying awake at night to take of the baby
Then she is not free
If she is expected to take up a job that allows her to reach home at a specific time to cook dinner
Then she is still not free
If she is expected to be married before 25
She is still not free
If her lips are glued to silence
Her hands tied with unnecessary obedience
And legs chained to a certain distance
She is still not free

Sarah True



Sarah True is a 19-year-old poet from Cape Town, South Africa. Her love for writing blossomed as an outlet for her thoughts and feelings. Inspired by the Gothic era, music from the 2000s, and all things spooky, she weaves words that delve into the depths of the human experience. Sarah finds comfort in poetry, allowing her emotions to flow onto the page. She invites readers to join her on a journey of introspection and release.

Sarah taught herself to read at the age of three, and her love of literature has been growing since then. She enjoys nature and spending time with her friends and family. Her biggest aspiration in life is to work in publishing.

Sarah True

far-away nearby

the seasons changed again

Did you stay the same?

There is no way for me to know, all my life you escaped me, you never stayed in my life long enough for me to understand

The lighting always changed

All I know of you, my father, is that you are exactly like me.

Things are gonna change, I can feel it

The constant refrain of my early teen years

The backing track of visits with you always repeating, I can feel it I can feel it I can feel it.

For over a decade I watched a man dying.

There were no car crashes, nor any cancer.

Just an intangible parasite eating at whatever kept you going

For 14 years I watched a man implode

And I couldn't do anything to help.

you pushed me away and kept your secrets close to your heart, you became a quiet seething mass.

I'm not angry at you. I love you

I will always love you

I understand why you did everything you did.

I'm not angry at you.

I want to say you're okay

I want to say it's all right

I want to tell you that you did nothing wrong

You're not a bad person

You've always been as good as you could be.

Anita Oguni



Anita Oguni is a poet and passionate writer from Cross River, Nigeria, who believes in the pure magic and power of storytelling. She published a novella, *Our Father is Dead* in 2018, and works as a communications expert in the finance industry. She takes an interest in the study of human behaviour and its impact on society as a whole. Anita thrives on the idea: 'A poem a day, keeps the pain away'.

Bògha Etem

“bògha etem” rings in your head like a school bell after school hours
“bògha etem” your mother’s favorite response to every calamity your tired hearts encounter
“bògha etem” you tell yourself when anxiety holds you down and leaves you breathless
“bògha etem” which means “hold your heart” in your native language is what you have learned to do.
You have learned all the ways to hold your heart both healthy and unhealthy
you have learned to hold your heart still
you have learned to breathe with a clogged chest
you have learned to hold your heart
you have christened yourself “bògha etem”.

Owuri

Carrying problems like the sea conveys debris
Owuri is like her name
clear
lucid
crystal
like water
refusing to be stained by the filth dumped on her
Owuri is like her name
clean
mild
sheer
Drowning your insecurities with all of her

Owuri is like her name
flowing and fitting into a bowl where you wash your sins
using your coarse hands as a scoop
Owuri reminds me of water
unassuming,
cleanser,
a willing host,
unbiased,
fills you up like a full-course meal
Owuri reminds me of water
When there is turbulence she runs into herself.

Home

The smell of Agbanya soup on fire wafted through my nose
filling the inner recesses of my being
awakening emotions, I thought were long buried
wrapped in your arms
I heedlessly shed the robe of loneliness I tightly had on
stirring up the vulnerability I tucked away
there are no walls with you no holds barred.
You are home.



How you run things

Here, you do not hold on to things that refuse to be held on to
Here, you do not choke on your words, you let them pour out like a fountain
Here, you do not plant flowers in gardens that are not yours to tend
Here, you adorn your desires on your body, you do not stifle your sighs of pleasure
Here, you hunt down the things you hunger for carrying your shame like a placard
Here, you do not crumple your needs and tuck them in your back pocket.
Here you do not truckload of peace for bags of peace that never open
Here, you do not shrink all that you are to accommodate the opinions of others
Here in your head, you are the kingpin.

My happiness no longer lives in abandoned cities

I no longer tie my happiness to cities or people
I no longer leave it on the front yard of those who toss it about
like football in a field
I do not generously give portions of it to clueless strangers
I no longer tie my happiness to cities or people
I do not leave it in cities that could get razed down by fire
Or cities that could be destroyed by an angry gush of water
I no longer tie my happiness to cities or people
I carry it around like a treasured backpack
I make a new home for my happiness
with every move I make
I no longer tie my happiness to cities or people
I carry my happiness the way I carry my heart
delicately yet protectively
I do not leave it unguarded
my happiness no longer lives in abandoned cities.

Gran's Intercession

You may fall like a house with no pillars and a weak foundation
but you will rise as resolute as the morning sun
intent on taking up space and blinding the gloom of the night.
You are here to bloom,
bloom, you will
Withering morphs to a revival at the sight of you.
Everything about you is
glorious
beautiful
divine.
Even your name is a prayer.

Shuwa



Svinurayi Gonera, AKA Shuwa, is a 19-year-old Cape Townian writer and singer. He began writing short stories and novels in primary school before stumbling into the world of poetry later in high school. Mr Sharief Petersen and Royston Pieterse, two of his teachers, took a significant interest in cultivating his talent and in Grade 11, he won his first poetry competition. In his matric year, two of his pieces were selected for inclusion in the Cedar House School youth publication entitled *Little Book of Big Voices*.

‘iSango’ is also the name of Shuwa’s beautiful single, which is available to listen to on [Spotify](#). Follow Shuwa on Instagram [@_shuwa_](#).

Shuwa

iSango

The sky bleeds blue into yellow
while the village falls asleep —
A sense of urgency
as the sun fades.

The fire could not be tamed,
but hot stones have now turned cold.
Kids play
Babies cry
brittle branches of charred oak
tender leaves that dissolve into nothing.

A singed, barren land that once raged with passionate flames
now home to nothing but sooty air and the echoes of long-forgotten names.

Smoke fills the air:
the blood is on your hands.
Blood on our land,
the tribal quarrels of men guilty of our division.
From the depths of the bottomless pit
to a future perhaps even more troublesome.

Descending into chaos from atop the hill of the jackal,
Kings and queens turned corrupt.
Man has betrayed us once again.
This land, a dangerous jungle
A jungle we call home.

Nyika ino, inengozi
Nyika ino, nhasi, haisi holy
iSango ratinoti
Kumusha.





THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

SHORT STORIES

Mohammed Babajide Mohammed



Mohammed Babajide Mohammed is a dedicated writer whose passion for storytelling was ignited in early childhood. Writing became not just a hobby, but a guiding beacon in a life that felt directionless. From a young age, the pen became his compass, leading him on a journey of self-discovery and providing a pathway back to a sense of purpose and belonging. Mohammed's words serve as both a map and a destination, guiding not only himself but also those who immerse themselves in the worlds he creates.

Mohammed Babajide Mohammed

A Traveler's Dilemma

On lonely nights, when the sun is silent and the winds are at slumber, I try to peer into the memories of my past, but I have lost so much to time. Sometimes I remember moments from my childhood days, when I was but a little girl—a little here, a little more there, but like water running through clenched fists, they no longer possess a definite form. However, my mind still harbours a few memories. They are not pleasant. They are of trauma, death, and horror.

One thing I remember like yesterday is that I should have perished alongside my family on the night that evil visited our home in Warsaw. But alas, fate would not have it so. My family was butchered by beasts who wore the flesh of men. These monsters claimed to be soldiers fighting for their country. It might have been for land or for glory. I cannot recall. All I remember are their faces, the mangled corpses of my parents and siblings sprawled on the cold floor, and the blazing embers that remained of our small cottage after the soldiers set it ablaze.

In the weeks that followed, amidst the bleak remnants of a war-ravaged city, I scavenged for survival. One evening, as night fell while I sifted through death, emptiness and ruins, a soft voice interrupted my solitude. The frail-looking woman stood as a silhouette against the setting sun. Her demeanour echoed the same misery emanating from me like a poisonous aura. Her pale blue eyes held understanding, bridging the gap of shared hardship. Without words, she extended a lifeline, welcoming me into her home. In that gesture, she became more than a saviour; she became the warmth I needed in the cold abyss of my existence. Her name was Sarah.

Sarah lived alone, for her husband had died a long time ago. She bore him no children, so in the stead of an heir, she adopted me. Loneliness relinquished its grip on my days, fading into the recesses of my mind as the warmth of a mother's love enveloped me. Life unfolded in comforting normalcy until my twelfth year arrived, bringing with it a harbinger of strange dreams.

In one such dream, I found myself navigating the familiar corridors of Sarah's home. The air hung heavy with an unspoken tension as I approached the kitchen. There, in the dim light, Sarah wept, her sobs echoing through the empty spaces. In fear, I asked her the cause of her despair, and she uttered words of mourning—"I lost my father this morning."

Days later, reality mirrored the dream with eerie precision, as its foretelling unfolded before my eyes, casting a surreal shadow over my newfound reality. It was then, at the tender age of twelve, that I realised my dreams were not mere figments of imagination; they were windows into the fabric of time...

As time went by, it dawned upon me that I could control this remarkable gift. So, one night, I willed myself back in time, and watched as my father frantically hid little me beneath the bed, unable to get to my siblings and my mother before a bullet caught him in the face. I watched as little me coiled and whimpered in horror, seeing my father's lifeless body hit the floor, and hearing the last screams of my brother and sisters as they were slaughtered like pigs, while my father's blood traced a path to little me under the bed like a final farewell. I watched as the soldiers crowned their havoc by setting the place on fire, the roof falling as a blackened little me scampered her way out. I watched little me take refuge beneath nearby trees as the orange flames consumed my home and claimed the remnants of my family. I watched the horror until there was nothing left, nothing but dust, blackness, and death.

When I woke up from this dream, I wept uncontrollably, and regardless of how hard Sarah tried, I couldn't tell her what I had just seen. However, seeing just how troubled she became over the next couple of days, I vowed to myself that I would never trace that particular memory again. So, instead, I travelled far and beyond to moments yet unborn, and to times



long dead, for you see, in time, my gift permitted me to see both the future and the past. Sometimes, I would go back to the happy times I shared with my family before the horror. Other times, I would go further back, before even my father was born. I could go anywhere, any when. However, I was unable to alter events, I could only visit as an audience. Like a spirit, I could not be seen, heard, or felt.

As I ventured deeper into the realms of my dreams, the toll on my waking self became palpable. Each nightly travel left an indelible mark, etching weariness into the lines of my face. Dark circles adorned my eyes like silent witnesses to the price paid for glimpses beyond the veil of time. The vibrancy that once coloured my waking hours waned, replaced by the subtle shadows of an existence intertwined with the ethereal. Sometimes, I would stare at the mirror for an eternity, and I would be unable to find myself in the visage that stared back at me. The more I traversed the corridors of time, the more I felt a piece of myself slipping away, like grains of sand carried by a relentless current. The weight of unseen burdens pressed upon my shoulders, and the innocence of youth gradually succumbed to the burdensome wisdom of a reluctant seer.

Recognising the toll my dreams were taking on me, I consciously limited my late-night voyages. The weariness etched on my face spoke of the burdens carried from the ethereal world. Yet, despite the visible strain, the allure of these journeys remained undeniable. Each venture into the unknown held a fascination that, even against the backdrop of my weary reality, pulled me into its captivating embrace. The juxtaposition of exhaustion and fascination formed a paradox that defined my nightly sojourns into the enigmatic realm of dreams.

In the times of the great Pharaohs of Egypt, I witnessed the grandeur of the pyramids, their colossal stones rising against the desert sun. Among the awe-inspiring structures, I saw workers toiling under the scorching sun, their backs bowed beneath the weight of the gigantic stones, a testament to the sacrifice woven into the tapestry of ancient history. During the sinking of the Titanic, the air was pierced by the haunting cries of desperate souls plunged into icy waters. Amidst the chaos, I glimpsed the anguished struggle of a man, teeth gnashing in a futile attempt to survive. I watched as hope abandoned him and he accepted his fate as he sank into his watery grave, encapsulating the tragic drama of that ill-fated night. Standing atop the Great Wall of China as it was being built, I felt the Earth tremble beneath the collective effort of countless labourers. Amidst the symphony of construction, a loose brick shifted, sending a man plummeting to his demise—a stark reminder of the human cost woven into the fabric of monumental endeavours.

These initial glimpses into historical events were but scratches on the surface of what my dreamscape held. It was a gradual unfolding, an evolution within the tapestry of my dreams. One night, while wandering the corridors of my dreams, I stumbled upon a celestial expanse—a realm untouched by the limitations of mortal existence. The stars whispered secrets, and galaxies danced in cosmic harmony. In that boundless void, I sensed a profound connection to realms beyond my human comprehension.

With each subsequent dream, the realization dawned upon me like a gradual revelation. I found myself traversing not only the annals of history but venturing into fantastical landscapes and alternate dimensions. The dreamscape became a canvas upon which the extraordinary and the impossible converged, transcending the conventional boundaries of my waking reality. In time, I discovered the extraordinary extent of my ability to transcend worlds within the realm of dreams. With this newfound power, I embarked on surreal journeys, visiting the sun—a brimming volcano in the dreamscapes—walked the moon's desolate surface, and soared through the skies with a sense of liberation that defied the laws of physics.

This transcendence wasn't simply a matter of sightseeing; it became a quest for understanding the limits of my own capabilities and the mysteries that the dream world held. As I explored these fantastical realms, my excursions evolved into a delicate dance

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between harnessing my powers and unravelling the enigmas concealed within the fabric of my dreams. Each visit became an opportunity to peel back layers of reality, to fathom the depths of imagination, and to test the boundaries of my connection with the ethereal dimensions that unfolded before me. But even though Sarah knew nothing of these dreams, the toll they took on my body betrayed a strangeness she could neither understand nor stop worrying about. When the doctors got tired of my visits, they postulated that rapid ageing was probably embedded within my genes. I nodded in agreement, convincing her that my real mother was that way too.

And perhaps I would have stopped, but one night, within the vast expanse of my dreamscapes, I sensed the presence of another traveller like me. The dream unfolded in hues of indigo, and amidst the surreal landscapes, her silhouette emerged. A figure cloaked in an ethereal glow, her features shrouded in the enigmatic play of shadows and light. Our encounter unfolded in a dreamscape reminiscent of an ancient library lost to time, with towering shelves that held the volumes of forgotten lore. As our gazes locked, I discerned a familiarity in her eyes—a shared recognition of the solitary journey we both undertook through the corridors of time.

She stood with an air of quiet confidence, her presence transcending the dreamlike ambience. A cascade of silver strands framed her countenance, and her eyes, pools of endless curiosity, held the wisdom of one who had traversed the dreamscape for millennia. In measured steps, I approached this mysterious fellow traveller, our gazes unwavering in the timeless space between dreams. The air around us thrummed with a palpable energy—an unspoken understanding that, in the boundless tapestry of dreams, we were not alone in our sojourn through the corridors of time.

Her name was Hannah. She was a little older, and in time, we became like sisters. She told me many things, including the fact that we were not so unique as there were several of us. Through her travels, she encountered men, women, and children alike. I found comfort in her words, and the world felt less lonely. She said they called people like us “Travelers”. I do not know who christened us with the name. But I believed it a fitting one.

“You can only travel as far as your imagination permits”, Hannah said. “If you lack imagination, you will never go very far.”

Hannah took me to places I could never have imagined. We flew far and wide, from the cold stiff lands of Antarctica to the hot terrains of Africa. She took me beneath the seas, and we flew across the ravines. We even visited other worlds—other civilisations. I bore witness to the splendour of it all. One night as we floated through the vacuum of space, I asked her the furthest she had ever travelled.

“Billions of miles from here,” she said before pointing to the stars sparkling and dimming in the distance, “but one day I will love to visit the stars.”

“Indeed, I would too,” I thought to myself. “Indeed, I would.”

My friendship with Hannah grew stronger over the years. And in time, I forgot the promise to myself to drift less often. In our dreams, we would meet at a place that only we knew, and from there, we could go anywhere. We were timeless, unbound by flesh—we were infinite.

One night, we travelled and found ourselves in a foreign land. The sun was white, and the waters sparkled like diamonds. The air was so still, each step we took echoed across a vast plain. How we had gotten there we could not tell, but it seemed we were drawn to this ethereal place. In the distance was a garden. The most beautiful garden I had ever seen. We ventured into this green magnificence, drawn to its by its beauty. In the garden’s heart sat an aged woman, her weathered face and sagging skin attesting to the weight of time. Wisps of silver framed her frail form, and her once-vibrant eyes now bore the milky film of blindness. Despite the years etched upon her, a regal grace emanated from her presence, as



if the garden itself paid homage to the one who had witnessed the passing of countless Eons.

Hannah was braver of us two, approaching the woman and asking, “Who are you?”

“My name is Duma,” said the old woman in a weak, gentle voice.

“Where do you come from?” asked Hannah.

“I?” replied the woman with a bland smile. “I come from a long time ago... from days unremembered.”

I cannot recall what made me ask the next question. But somehow, I knew the answer before the question parted my lips. “Are you alive?”

She looked in my direction with her glazed eyes and smiled. “I died a long time ago.”

We did not know what to say to her words, so we let the silence play its part. I had sensed she was not of the living, for her presence felt somewhat peculiar, so her response did not surprise me, although it shocked me, nonetheless.

“In life, I was very much like you...” The dead woman began her story. “I travelled to the furthest places. I bore witness to the beginning and the ending of the world. I was present in the times of the Great War—the last war—when the air turned to ash, the clouds turned black, and with the blackness came the fires that scorched nations and ended the world. I was there when the first men walked the Earth, when the first kings built their castles and fortresses. I was there when those castles fell to time and decay. I was there when civilisations crumbled and became undone. I have been to places you can never imagine; seen things no one has. I have been to the edge of the universe and beyond...”

She rose and walked towards us. Even with her sightless eyes and aged body, she moved with lofty grace. As she drew closer, I began to feel a certain air around her. I could not tell what it was, but I knew it to be unnatural, sinister even. If only I had taken heed to my heart, perhaps...

“Where do you come from?” Hannah asked again, her voice filled with wonder and awe.

Duma pointed at the skies, to the glowing distant orbs above.

“The stars?” Hannah asked in astonishment.

“No,” the blind old woman replied, a mysterious smile playing on her lips. “Where I come from transcends even the celestial tapestry. It extends far beyond the sun itself. A place beyond the stars...”

Hannah, caught in the enchantment of the revelation, couldn’t suppress her euphoria, her hand instinctively covering her mouth in awe.

“A place where time is but a whisper,” the old woman continued, her words carrying a mysterious weight, as if unveiling a fragment of a cosmic secret hidden within the fabric of existence.

I did not know if Hannah felt the same foreboding as I, but if she had, she took no heed to the winds. In awe, she asked, “You live there?”

“Yes. Many who have once lived in your world now live there too.”

“You mean dead people?” I asked in fear, for I had just realised what the place was. It was the abode of the dead.

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As Hannah made to take a step forward, I held her back. It seemed she had been put in a trance, swayed by the old woman's words. The moment I broke the trance, the woman was gone, the garden had withered, and we were left in a barren land where not even the wind resided.

Weeks passed and all Hannah could talk about was the old woman in the garden. She yearned to see her. She screamed her name, but Duma would not appear. I tried to dissuade her, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. Hannah longed for that special place, and I knew there was little I could do to stop her.

This went on and on, until one day, Hannah was gone. Our dream encounters, a familiar dance in serene moonlit clearings, abruptly ceased. No longer did Hannah grace the shared dreamscape. The comforting echoes of our laughter turned into a haunting silence. In the absence of our rendezvous, the realisation hit me—Hannah had departed, venturing to the place beyond the stars, leaving the dreamscapes a lonely expanse. The very place she longed to explore had become her sanctuary, leaving me to navigate the dream realms alone, haunted by the echoes of our shared journeys.

Several months passed, and I was already starting to get used to not having Hannah in my dreams, then one evening, she was right there. She sat atop a cliff overlooking the Aegean Sea. She was dressed in white attire and her back was turned to me. Slowly and cautiously, I approached her. Thrice I called her name, and thrice I did not receive an answer. I placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and breathed her name once more. My old friend slowly turned to look at me, revealing a face devoid of expression. Like Duma, her eyes were now glazed. She too had become blind!

“Do you see?” she whispered, her blind eyes peering over my shoulder at something that stood behind me, something that was beyond my sight. I knew it stood behind me for I could feel its presence.

I turned around slowly as my eyes trailed her gaze, but all I saw was a gentle wind stirring up debris. When I turned back to look at Hannah, she was gone.

When I woke up from that dream, I looked myself in the mirror and felt Sarah's panic for the first time. At only twenty, I looked exactly like my mother did at thirty-five—the age she died. I convinced myself that I could no longer afford to make these dream-trips.

And so, years passed, forests gave way to civilisations, man flew the skies more frequently than birds, and I forgot how to fly in my dreams. I met a man, fell in love, left Sarah, and bore children. In time, I forgot completely about my gift. I beseeched it to stay where it belonged—in my memories. However, my curiosity refused to be buried, and for years I sought to find Hannah, not in dreams, but in real life.

I searched far and wide until I found myself in front of her little cottage in a distant land. How I found her, I do not know. Perhaps I was drawn to her. Perhaps we were connected by bonds unbroken by distance and time. Like me, Hannah had aged, but she had been in a deep slumber for years, unable to wake up, at the mercy of her aged mother who tended to her.

“She has been in a coma for seventeen years,” said the poor old woman. “Since the 14th of June 1952.”

I remembered the date. It was the last time I set my eyes on her; the day she disappeared atop the Aegean cliff.

I sat next to my friend and wept. Like a child pleading with her mother not to leave, I implored Hannah to return to the land of the living, but it was to no avail. My friend was already gone. Gone to the place beyond the stars, and I knew she was never coming back.



As I left, I held her palms in goodbye, and the moment my skin touched hers, I felt the same sensation of dread and despair I felt all those years in the garden—the day Duma appeared to us.

I immediately relinquished my hold on her, but it was too late. I started to feel eyes on me. Eyes unseen. Eyes that did not belong to the living. In that moment, I knew they saw me—the dwellers of the place beyond the stars. I could not see them, but they saw me... I could feel their sinister gaze upon my soul. I thought if I left Hannah's cottage, I would be rid of them, but alas, I was wrong.

Now, everywhere I go, I feel them in the winds. I cannot see them, but I know they are always with me. As days pass, the feeling grows stronger, and I know that one day, I too will be gone.

It is midnight now. A feeling wakes me up from my sleep. I cannot tell what it is, but I can swear that I heard my name being parted from inhumane lips just before I awake. The Ambience is strange and the silence unnerving. As I look around the dark room, something catches my eye.

In the corner of the room, beneath the shadows, stands something... something unnatural. I cannot tell what it is, for it is shrouded by the night. The more I stare at it, the more it begins to take form. It appears to be the silhouette of a man, gaunt and ravaged. Its fingers are unnaturally long and thin, having the semblance of claws. Its long neck is bent at an awkward angle, as if broken. It shares a strong resemblance to a withered corpse hanging from a hangman's noose.

It looks at me, but not with eyes. It has no eyes, yet I know it is looking at me for I feel its gaze piercing my flesh and into my very soul. Its presence is malignant, its intent is sinister.

With dry, fumbling lips, I ask, "Wh...Who are you?"

"A visitor," the entity breathes.

It does not reply with words. It is as though we are connected by our minds, and we can commune our thoughts with one another.

"What do want?" I ask again, trying to sound as if I am unafraid, though I know my faltering composure betrays me.

The entity laughs in a shrill inhuman voice that makes the hairs of my skin stand on end. It slowly raises its wasted hand, pointing one of its malformed fingers at me. "We...want...you..."

As I stare at the monster in the shadows, I begin to feel the fear trickle down my spine like icy water. It seems my feet have been rooted to the floor for I am unable to move in the slightest. But then, as mysteriously as the visitor came, it disappears, and I am left in terror and fear.

As the sweat pours down my face, I realise there are some places we—Hannah and I—should never have ventured. There are some things the living is not meant to see.

The visitor is gone, it has left fear and dread in its stead. The mirror completes the horror, showing me folds and wrinkles when I look back at my thirty-five-year-old self.

I know that soon, the visitor will be back; they will be back—whoever and whatever they are. I know one day soon, they will be back to take me to the place beyond the stars. They will take me...and I shall never return.

Bongiwe T. Maphosa



Bongiwe Maphosa is a budding author with a passion for storytelling. With her thought-provoking narratives, she takes her readers on a literary adventure. Bongiwe's works on the human condition from a fresh perspective have earned her recognition and publications in the Avbob Poetry Anthology of 2019, The Writer's Club of South Africa 2021, and *JAY Lit* in 2021. She hopes to cement her place in the literary community.

The Way Home

I cradle my boy in my arms until his body is cold. The once dark blue school bag holds his head securely against my body. At first, I wonder if the bones protruding from my chest will cause him to bruise, then I remember that he can no longer feel me. The tattered blanket that raised me covers his tiny body, shielding him from the eyes of seasoned grandmothers on the bus.

“Cover the baby. He would rather sweat than catch a cold.” My mother’s words echo. *What do I do now, mama, when no blanket can ever make him sweat again?* My son is cold, so cold and all I can do is hope no one realises he is dead and kicks us off the crowded bus.

The January sun beats down on us in denial, as if she is distraught that her ember caress cannot warm my child back to life. The dusty road shakes and bumps the old bus making us bob along with and tricks into believing my baby is moving.

We sigh to a stop in front of a rusty fuel station. I can smell the ripening faeces (in the long drop toilet) from the bus. Tired “mhmms” and “euuhs” rise from their seats and become as giddy as children at the thought of relief. I would like to get off with them, but fear has my body shackled to the seat. Fear warns me that if I stand, I will be accepting my baby’s death, someone will notice, and he will be taken from me. Instead, I allow fear to shut my eyes and give them momentary rest from restraining my tears. Awaiting me is not the usual reddish darkness of the inside of my eyelids, but a replay of the exact moment his last breath slipped silently from his lips.



Before the sun rose in Limani. That is when I left him asleep beside my mother warmed by the little ember stones in the rondevaal. I hoped that if I kept him asleep long enough, I would have time to make money and by formula from Idah’s spaza shop. I had squeezed my nipples raw only to draw a few measly drops into his mouth. My mother raised me in prayer, and I was never to question the Lord’s plans, but sometimes (in her absence) I would ask the Lord what the point of living was if we only suffered to meet Him again. He never answered.

I watch my boy while wearing my washed-out overalls and wonder who he wronged to end up with a mother like me. I am a university dropout who lost her scholarship because she got pregnant. I will never forget the sigh and the disappointed look in mama’s eyes when I returned to her with a tightly bound belly and only the clothes I left with. No degree, no money, no husband.

The cushion I place between my buttocks and the hard bicycle seat does little to lessen the force of the uneven dust road on my distended tailbone. It is knowing that I have no choice that keeps my feet firmly on the pedals as I try to outrun the sun.

“Kwanele!” calls a heavy breather. I do not need to turn my head to know that Pricilla is waddling hastily from her hut, almost tripping on her overalls on her way to me. Her bicycle, the only inheritance from her absent father, groans and complains as she boards it, tyres buckling under her fuller body.

“Ndoda, if I was not poor, I would have stayed in bed today.” She sighs as she languidly caresses her swollen belly. She insists on calling me ‘Ndoda’ because she is the only one who knows that I am pretending to be a man to get higher-paying work. *Well, you are pregnant with my baby girl. I will provide for her.* I retorted months ago, sending her into fits of boisterous laughter. We have no way of knowing the baby’s sex, but the all-knowing eyes of the walking community pregnancy tests told her it was a girl because she carried high.



“Just don’t go into labour on the barley. We are too poor to replace it.” I sigh, feigning concern. She rolls her eyes and pedals ahead of me, knees further apart than the handles themselves.

Priscilla’s husband works in the city and sends back food for the baby as if it feeds itself.

‘We need to prioritise the baby. I cannot be sending you food when you get rations for free. Be reasonable.’ Priscilla mocks him in his pitchy voice. When he was courting her, he did not spare any expense. He lured her with fast food and movie dates and gifts he bought from the city. What he neglected to tell her was that he was spoiling her with money he borrowed from his father. Now that he had gotten her pregnant, she is an expense to him, an unnecessary one.

She keeps the money he sends buried somewhere in the dry garden. She will not touch it. Instead, she ploughs and plants in a corner of her mother’s field, her low-hanging stomach getting in the way of the fork she uses to turn the soil. She will give birth soon.

“I hope my child does not inherit Sphiwo’s big head. God forbid. I don’t even know what I saw in him. Nxn.” She punctuated her anger by feeling her belly for her baby’s head.



There is already a queue of villagers when we arrive at the community centre. Old and young alike wiping off the dew that rested on them as they spent the night waiting so they would not be the unfortunate people who are told that the Barley has run out.

“Mamuka, Limani.” Pricilla greets the villagers as she retrieves the key to open the community hall. Even though you can hear the hints of starvation hiding in their voices, the warmth in their replies is enough to coax a smile.

The floor is cold and hard, reaching my skin through the cushion. I sit behind the chipped door, out of the reach of hungry eyes peeking in to estimate how much longer there is until their next meal. Sindi and Dumi are amongst the children who aid us in sorting the rations until the rest of the working crew get here. They visited me often to check if my baby had arrived, but I had not seen them since he was born (no doubt the work of their grandparents reminding them a newborn can only be seen by outsiders at six weeks). A blind eye is turned when the unofficial sorters each take two sugar canes as their unofficial payment on their way outside to queue once again.

I watch the children’s expert hands freeing the dried corn from its cob. I imagine their stomachs grumbling in anticipation of eating *iGwadla* from a faded plastic bag that serves as a lunchbox. The grannies place their headscarves on the children’s laps to prevent them from staining their uniforms as they sort. They will have to drop off their rations at home before they make the lengthy journey to school.

I hear the collective, contained relief that announces the arrival of the rations truck. Green vehicle with chipped paint – and enough smog coming from its exhaust pipes to overwhelm the dust it raises – pulls in more people with its hacking.

Five different queues. Pricilla announces that all those who need oil are to line up in front of her with their containers opened and ready to receive. Two men each carry out large plastic buckets filled to the brim with brick cow fat used as a substitute for sunflower oil. This is donated by a wealthy livestock farmer who fled the village after impregnating three teenagers and denied paternity. Anyone could see his wide nose and chubby fingers passed down to them. He ran after his wife (who was grateful for the way out of her marriage) and has been sending food to cover his shameful acts. The same elders who knocked the ground with wooden canes when cursing his name, soon praised him for feeding them.

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The queues for *Jodo* (pumpkin) seeds and *iGwadla*, go much quicker as the villagers usually keep the seeds they harvest from their crops. Only new residents join this line, novices to poverty.

It is the water and barley queues that summon the frustration hunger creates. This is where I am stationed, among the other men. The truck driver finds his place on top of the truck and threatens to withhold the rations if people do not queue in an orderly manner. His gruff voice and exaggerative gestures have a way of staining my thoughts with malice. It is the way his muddy boots stand on the Barley tank and insists he towers over everyone that make me wish he would fall off, just once and land in a cloud of dust before the villager's feet.

"A'kusetshenzwe madoda." He says to us when he is satisfied with the people's compliance. White buckets fill the air and shake in eagerness. It is as if, while we fill the buckets with barley, they can already feel their stomachs stop growling.

From the top of the truck, I spot Pricilla running to the toilets with my empty bag in tow. I do not bother trying to sneak away unnoticed. Instead, I prepare to boldly state that I am the father of the child she is carrying and was just making sure that she is alright. A thousand thoughts fill my head in the seconds it takes me to walk to the toilet. *Could she be in labour? How will I reach her mother, her husband? Will we still get our day's pay and rations?*

Muffled groans sound from the only stall in the toilet and I am certain I will have to deliver her baby myself.

"Are you alright in there?" I ask, fearing the answer.

"No. The Sphiwo's head is on its way." She says and clicks her tongue. She loves that baby, no matter how she insults her. Sphiwo once threatened to take her to his family once she was born and Pricilla threw a pot of hot water at him and told him to birth his own. He only insults her over the phone, never in person and never while she cooks.

"Will you make it to the hospital?" I ask. She lifts her dress and the top of a hairy little head peeks back at me.

"Sizani!" I shout for help. The men shovelling barley glance at me then their boss and continue working. The villagers are too scared to leave the food lie in case it runs out. Only the groundsman with a guaranteed meal for the day walks over.

"Kwenzakalani?" He asks, peeking into the toilet. He jumps back when he sees Pricilla's parted legs and the puddle of fluid beneath her. She will not make it to the hospital. He pulls off his hat and wrings it in his hands unsure of what to do. I tell him to tell his boss to pause the rations so the old ladies can help. He runs, tripping on the short distance to the truck. The grandmothers rush to the toilet, immediately getting to work. Pricilla pushes and curses Sphiwo, his father, his sister, and his dog. When the baby comes out, however, she smiles. She smiles and insults only to smile again. When I hear the baby cry for the first time my breasts fill up with milk.

"She has her moments of bringing good news. And she does not have her father's head. You have all the time in the world to see her. Menelisi needs you now." She shoos me with a smile.



The Mopani trees between my mother's hut and the hall part for me and make my kilometre walk to my baby much shorter. My heartbeat swells my ears and I almost miss my neighbour's son, Emihle, calling for me. Tears drip into his (usually smiling) mouth as he struggles to breathe.



wince at the pain of landing on my back on the uneven dust road and I am already running into the trees when the bus sighs to a stop. My ears are ringing from the shock gossip I know is taking place on the bus. A mad woman with her baby's corpse has run into the bush, surely, she has been bewitched. The only thing that has bewitched me is the thought of someone taking my boy from me and putting him in a hole under my feet. He is meant to be in my arms, where he is now.

It is sunset when I simmer down to a slower pace. The nights can be cruelly cold, and I will have to find shelter soon. I walk until my body forces me to acknowledge my earlier injury as well as the hunger I can no longer ignore. The only edible thing I have on me is the breastmilk intended for my baby and a handful of wild fruits I had stuffed in my overall pockets and forgotten about for who knows how long. As I squeeze my breast into my hand, I think about what I could have done to save his life and about what exactly could have ripped him so suddenly from this life. I think about this so thoroughly, I hope and pray that I do not acknowledge how stiff he has become. His little body no longer curves with my arm when I hold him. It is when a little hand flops out of the blanket and onto my exposed arm that I feel his cold skin chill me to my core. My child is dead.

I want to scream into the fading daylight, at the sky, at the little brown birds I see feeding their young. I need to curse at the very ground that will eventually swallow my son, rip out the grass that will grow on his grave, and gnaw on the sand that will be put on him. I know he will not hear me, but part of me still thinks that screaming will wake him from his sleep. Now, the thinking is overwhelming, and I choose to walk through my pain. Anything is better than being left alone with my thoughts.

I walk in the direction of where the bus should have taken me. I know this forest. My feet have conspired with my heart and led me to the one place I did not want to go: into the past.

The college residence seems much bigger than when I left it. Perhaps it is the lights of the students burning the midnight oil against the silhouette of the stars or those who have left their books for a night of partying. I know in which of those groups I will find my child's father. The walk to the gate of the school I dropped out of is a shameful one. I hear the unsaid whispers on the minds of my peers about how I disappeared months ago and now return to campus in muddy overalls and a baby in my arms. If only they knew.

I stand in front of his dormitory revising its layout and where I will lay my baby down while he screams at me for disappearing. One of us had to stay and have a chance; otherwise, what life could we have hoped to give our child? Not that it matters anymore. Fear of the unknown nails my feet firmly at his door, but I am ready to run should he open the door. My name is called, yet the door remains closed. I know it is him when he rests his hand on my shoulder and beckons me to face him, but I cannot. I cannot look into those eyes after all these months and tell him that I ran from school, from him, because I was pregnant. I cannot tell him that I got to raise our son for only a month. I surely cannot tell him that the son he never got to hold, is dead.

I flinch when he reaches past me and opens the door. He waits for me to get inside and his patience grows the guilt in me. I take small, light steps inside making sure my back is still turned until I reach the sofa in the centre of the room. He still has the stupid cushion I printed a picture of us on. I hear the door close then books fall onto the floor, a sharp inhale then my name exclaimed. The tears fall on my cheeks.

"Kwanele..." His voice frightens me after all these months. My name hangs in the air like a dirty secret, scolding me like a naughty child and I am too scared to say anything.

In a few hesitant steps, he is seated beside me, asking to open the blanket. And when he does, two milky brown eyes stare back at him. Their eyes do not stay closed like they do in movies.

Bongiwe T. Maphosa

“Sisi, come with me. Please...” The little boy manages to choke out. Nothing feels all right after he says this. I am not running as fast as my body needs me to. My newly empty womb is telling me only pain awaits me.

I know when I find my mother’s face buried in her tear-soaked shirt, that my womb was right.

It is for the first time I see my son with my mother that he is not in a blanket. She is rocking herself back and forth, uttering no sound, and denying all grief. My elderly neighbour stands behind me, no doubt ready to catch me should my knees buckle from the pain. She knows better than to rub our backs and try to console us. After all, she was there to see first-hand what happens when we are comforted. My father’s funeral was tearless and held during the bargaining phase of our grief. As soon as my mother was pulled into a hug, she jumped into the hole with the casket and refused to be helped unless they could prove that the sand was not too heavy for his chest. I held my c sister in my arms and watched my mother fall apart.

My mother is standing right in front of me when I come to. She used her trembling hand to wipe the single tear that sneaks though my denial. I see her lips form my name over and over again, yet I hear not a single word.

“Mama,” I say. My breasts leak even more. I lift him and squeeze breastmilk into his eyes like I have seen many mothers do to clear infections. All he does is stare at me without blinking and let the milk glide over his cheeks.



They will collect his body in the morning. While everyone mourns in another hut, I pack donated baby clothes into my bag and wait until they fall asleep. He is tucked tightly in his blanket when I close my eyes and I hope while I sleep, he will close his eyes too.

The rooster crows and jolts me awake. I am disoriented from the sudden noise until my baby’s cold skin sobers me up. I move to take my baby away from this place that is thick with sorrow and poverty. My body commands itself as my brain refuses to give orders. I sneak past my mother and neighbours and bolt for the gate. If I hurry, I can still catch the morning bus on its way out.

This time, the trees seem to sprout from nowhere, thriving on wasting what little time I have. The sand swallows my feet with every leaded step I take. In my haste to get away, I knock someone flat on their back and receive insults in my mother tongue.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Kwanele? What are you doing out with the baby at this time? Mama sent people to my place because something is wrong. Do you know...” This is my sister’s voice. But I cannot stop to help her up, the bus leaves soon. Even though she is shouting, her voice fades into a whisper as I leave her behind.

It is a good thing that I know this place the way I do, otherwise I would have surely missed the last bus. The bus driver, along with the elderly that fill it, scolded me silently for bringing an infant out of the house. Culturally, I am to stay in my room with my baby for at least a month. But hunger had cruelly stolen this luxury from me. Now, I wish I had stayed.



I curse myself for falling asleep. It is because I fell asleep that this nosy woman beside me is screaming as if she has been carrying her dead child for hours. It is because I fell asleep that I am shoving old people out of the crowded bus aisle and making my way to the door. I do not wait for the bus to stop. The rusted door gives way and tosses me out. I do not have time to



He leaps to his feet for two seconds before shock hammers his knees to give in and he is on the ground. While he is whispering, “Oh my God”, I look at my baby for the first time since he died. Strange. This pale little body is not the one I once held to my empty breast, not the same body that grew in me, not the same body whose warmth got me out of bed and to work in the morning. His skin is so pale, so cold, it does not resemble my little Menelisi at all. Yet, I cannot let him go. It is when I attempt to wipe off the tear drops that fall on his skin that I touch his little hand. I forget all about his wailing father and the people I ran from back home and on the bus.

Suddenly, it is me and my baby in our little hut. His eyes are not milky, they are dark like his father’s. He encases my finger in his whole hand and smiles in jerks while I sing him to sleep as we walk to the bed we share and drift off to sleep. We have a shared dream tonight, one where I see him grow up.



I am chained to a hospital bed when I wake up. I hear my child’s father lie to the police about why we took so long to report a corpse, then I feel the bed sink when he climbs into it and pulls me into his arms. I am sorry. I want to say, but along with my baby, death has taken away my ability to speak. One day I will be able to look him in the eyes again. One day I will explain to him why I ran from him even though I did not want to. One day I will tell him about our son and his dark brown eyes. One day I will ask him to forgive me for robbing him of the chance to nurse my pregnancy cravings. One day I will tell him what it was like to hold our son while he was alive. One day... Just not today.

The day of the funeral is heavy and difficult. I did not know they made coffins that small until I had to pick one out. I chose a small box to put my son into a hole in the ground, where I will never hold him again. I think about how I will bury my son in the only new clothes he will ever have, how I will always blame myself for his death, and how he will never know how safe he would have felt in his father’s arms. I think more about how I have been unable to pray or talk to God. I wanted to know why he put this little boy in my life only to take him back after thirty-five days. When I heard my son’s cause of death, I stopped asking God why, because no reason could ever be enough for me. I am no stranger to grief, but I have never felt this empty before.

The sun is too grief-stricken to shine past the clouds that hide it today. She does not mask her feelings. She let a single tear drop fall on the still budding flower I plucked to comfort my son in his final resting place. Like it, he was taken too soon. And when I drop the flower onto the casket, I drop into the hole with it.

Abiodun Awodele



Abiodun Awodele likes to think of himself as a mix of many unlikely parts which somehow fit together into one body. The Maskuraid, as he is known, writes both prose and poetry and currently calls Sheffield, UK, home.

AMEN

Tired of the noise blaring from the TV, I jumped off the sofa, marched to the round center table, and picked up the remote control. Two quick slaps to its heavily taped back panel brought on the red indicator light that showed it was ready for errands, and I pressed the button for Supersport 10. An old FA Cup match between Chelsea and Crystal Palace was on, a better option than the ‘Miracle Half Hour’, which had been threatening my sanity since it started some fourteen minutes ago. I was about to resume my seat when Mum’s voice came for me.

‘Ogbeni, tune that thing back to where you met it, now!’

Oooohhhhh!

‘I thought you were busy,’ I grumbled as I reluctantly obeyed, and then reduced the TV’s volume. ‘It was making too much noise.’

‘Let it make noise, my dear,’ she fired back. She was outside in the compound breaking Egusi, but I could hear her clearly through the window. The rest of the compound could probably hear her too.

‘It is not noisy when you watch football, is it? It is not noisy when you shout, ‘Mercy!’ ‘Konado!’ up and down. I don’t know what kind of devil now lives inside you that won’t allow you to hear the word of God. That Satan will die soon l’agbara Jesu.’

It was a struggle to keep my laughter quiet.

My family have always been staunch members of The Apostolic Church. Two years before, Mum was ordained as a deaconess, and if you know the church very well, you will know how spirit-filled and sanctified you must be before you can be ordained as a deaconess. My Mum could out-pray the most dedicated prayer warrior in our parish, and she expected that her children should follow in her steps.

Sunkanmi, my younger brother, always made her proud. A popular member of the choir, he also assisted the janitor in cleaning the church every Saturday and was a prominent member of the Evangelical team. I, on the other hand, had never really been interested in religion even though I had no choice in the matter.

When I gained admission into the University of Abuja, I stopped attending church with the rest of the family. First, I complained that the Apostolic church service bored me to death after all the glamour of campus fellowships. Mum would admonish that church was not meant to be for entertainment, then she would complain bitterly to Dad anytime he was home. My father worked with a tractor manufacturing company in Funtua and only visited us for short periods every other month. Tired of being asked to make me see reason time and time again, he finally brokered a compromise to which Mum reluctantly agreed. I could worship at the Loveworld Fellowship a couple of streets away from the house any time I was home, but I still had to attend conventions and other special programs. I’m sure the man just wanted to spend his time off work in peace, especially as the many ASUU strikes kept me at home a lot. That uneasy compromise between his wife and first son, however, fell apart in my second year.

The year I stopped attending church altogether, it led to a full-blown war. Mum could simply not understand that I wasn’t interested in worshipping God. Not hers, not any other one. Whenever I was home on holiday, she would give me hell throughout my stay. Unfortunately, I had no other place to go and had to bear the endless stream of religious literature about ‘finding God’, which she dumped on me. She even brought her Area and



District pastors to help me realign my path, but nothing changed. All her fasts and prayers did not move my faith needle one inch.

‘Adeolu!’

‘Ma!’

What again?

‘You didn’t hear me?’

‘No ma, I didn’t. What did you say?’ Of course, I did.

‘Adeolu,’ she called again. ‘Adeolu! Adeolu, how many times did I call you? Do not try me this afternoon. I want to hear you say amen.’

See me see trouble.

‘Amen? To what ma?’

There is a way my Mum’s voice vibrates when she is praying in high gear, or when someone is working her last nerve.

‘I said God’s wrath will drive out the demons in your chest very soon and I didn’t hear you say amen. The God of Apostle Babalola will bring you back into the fold in Jesus’ name.’

I need to de-escalate this matter soon before it becomes full-blown.

‘Amen,’ I responded tamely.

‘Speak up...’

‘AMEN! AMIN,’ I shouted, properly pissed.

I will soon leave this house for good!

‘Yes. Good. That’s how a good Christian child responds to prayer.’

I was tired of the drama and needed to cool off, so I went to my room, changed my shirt, and headed to Chuka’s place.



After youth service, I got a place of my own and left the trouble at home behind. All I could manage from my meager salary as a supervisor in a soap-making company was a small room and parlour in Somolu, but at least the place was free of nagging. I hadn’t been to church in years, in fact, I could comfortably pass for an atheist with the way my heart was at the time. However, any time I heard a word of prayer, I would remember Mum’s haranguing and say ‘amen’ with a chuckle.

God will not begrudge this prodigal son an occasional joke, would He?

Abiodun Awodele

Fashoro Street, where I lived, was certifiably bipolar. During the dry season, the unpaved street was a dust bowl. Meanwhile, a battered signpost beside the entry gate announced the award of a contract by the State Government to pave the road and install proper drainage, with a project duration of 16 weeks. Nobody knew exactly how long that sign had been there, probably more than 16 years, judging by the state of the road's disrepair. We, the residents, regularly had to sweep out copious amounts of dust from our homes. Luckily for us, the street had many gullies, which severely limited motorized traffic, else we would have choked to death.

With the coming of the rains, Fashoro street would transform. The makeshift drainage channel was very shallow, and the lightest showers would cause an overflow of muddy water into the million-and-one craters lining the road. Many of them formed pools of brown, which eventually turned green after a few days, creating free housing for noisy frogs and colonies of mosquitoes for months until the rains receded. The pools overflowed when an occasional motorist, usually a visitor, decided to brave the odds and drive through them. The smell was usually terrible. Except for some abandoned carcasses, none of the residents of Fashoro Street owned a working vehicle, although a few had motorcycles.

Number 23, my building, sat a few houses to the end of the L-shaped street. Decades of exposure to harsh weather had sandpapered the building so much it was difficult to tell what colour it had originally been painted. The house was a 16-room bungalow, eight rooms on both sides, with a central passage running straight down the middle from front to back door. Its rooms were small and dark, with terrible ventilation, and the walls were paper-thin. Two communal bathrooms and toilets stood alone on the left side of the backyard, while the kitchen occupied prime position on the right. Despite repeated warnings by Daddy Peter, the caretaker, a few tenants sometimes used the central passage as a makeshift kitchen. Despite its infirmities, house number 23 was home.

Unable to sleep, I turned on my back in bed. PHCN was out and the heat was bad, but more annoying than that, my neighbors were fighting again. When my middle-aged co-tenants, Papa and Mama John, did battle as was their regular pastime, I had a ringside seat whether I liked it or not, because we shared a wall. I would have moved my bed to my other room to avoid their constant bickering, but that one opened to the veranda outside, where tenants trying to escape their stuffy rooms gathered to catch some air until much later in the night. On their part, Papa and Mama John had only one room. Nobody on the street had ever asked about John.

'Na this small money your mates dey drop for soup, ba?' Mama John asked her husband.

Ah ha! Today's brouhaha is about money.

'Na wetin I get be that,' Papa John replied. 'If e nor reach to manage, make you return am.'

'Useless man. Only useless man na im go drop one tausan for soup, come dey expect plenty obstacle inside.'

'Long throat woman,' he countered. 'Na woman wey nor dey satisfy na im no fit manage one tausan for dis Buhari economy.'

'Gerraway,' she hissed.

'You sef, gerraway.'

'Go and die, yeye man.'

'Winch. So that you go fit inherit my property, abi? Odeshi, you don fail.'



'Which property? Tear tear jeans? Akube slippers? Radio wey no fit comot for one station? Abeegi. Go and die biko, make space dey for better people.'

Silence fell after that. I imagined Papa John had decided to cease fire. Some minutes later, their door opened and closed, and I heard footsteps going down the corridor.

Smart guy. Give her some space. There's work in the morning, I need to sleep.

'Mscheeeeeeeeeeeeeew. Stupid and stingy man,' Mama John fired her last shot at the closed door. 'God go punish you. Just go and die!' 'Amen.'

At least I could try to sleep.



The next day, I went to lunch with a colleague, Oyinda. We arrived at our usual joint to a shouting match between the service girl and a customer, one of the many okada riders who frequented the place in search of cheap food just like us. The man claimed he had already paid for his food and was due some change, while Risi claimed his bill, which he was yet to pay came to a thousand and two hundred naira. Risi was a favorite of mine, and when the situation looked like it was not going to get resolved any time soon, I stepped in and offered to pay the amount in contention. The owner, Madam Chop One Chop Two, didn't play with her money and the poor girl would have had to cough the sum from her earnings at the end of the day.

'Thank you, Oga Ade,' Risi curtsied as she brought our order after the guy had gone. 'That guy na thief. E no pay me that money, he just dey use bold face.'

'That's okay, Risi,' I responded, adjusting the table to receive the plate of steaming Amala, which she placed in front of me.

'E pain me sha, but I pray say my God go catch am. Soon sef.'

'Amen' slipped out before I could help myself.

Oyinda's cocked eyebrow said everything. Everybody in my office was aware of my stand on God and religion.

'Calm down,' I laughed. 'It's a joke, a personal one. I'm not about to become one of you gullible guys who believe in one Almighty deity that lives in the sky.'

'Is that so?'

'Yep.'

'Personally, I think you're just dodging the inevitable. Your heart is searching for answers. You need to give God...'

'Please, don't start. The only thing I need right now is to dig into this plate of premium Amala.'

Abiodun Awodele

I knew Oyinda worshipped at Winners Chapel because she had tried to invite me to her church several times in the past. If not for the fact that I was sweet on her, I would have cut her off for her Christian leanings. To prevent her from pursuing the topic, I washed my hands and started to eat.

We were rounding up almost thirty minutes later when another motorcyclist parked opposite the joint, walked in and called on Risi. After asking for a chilled bottle of Star, he started to regale her with some gist about a Task Force raid he just escaped from.

Risi skipped over to our table with a wide grin on her face.

‘Oga Ade, I no talk am?’

‘What?’ I asked, before I mopped up some ewedu with my last ball of Amala.

‘Task force don carry dat okada man wey no gree pay my money. My God, no dey sleep.’

Back in the office, Oyinda tried to resuscitate the conversation about my spirituality.

‘You know, Ade, God loves you. Give him a chance in your life...’

‘Oyinda, drop this matter. See, my mother has done everything you can think of and more to sway me. Guess what? I’m still here, heart harder than Pharaoh’s. There’s nothing you can say that will change my mind.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really. Now, can we move on?’

Olu, the third occupant of the office who had been quiet during our exchange, noticed the change in my mood and signaled for her to stop. I nodded my appreciation and for a while, we continued working in silence.

‘What if He shows you a sign? Would you give Him a chance?’

I pretended not to hear.

‘Oyinda! What’s with you? The guy said to leave him alone...’ Olu snapped.

‘Hang on, Olu.’ I interjected, suddenly interested in the chance to prove to her once and for all that such things as miracles were just mere gimmicks by unscrupulous men that made for great television but did not apply in reality.

‘What do you mean by a sign?’

She almost jumped down my throat in her eagerness.

‘Well, what if something miraculous happened to you? Something totally unbelievable. Would you reconsider your stand?’

I pushed my seat back and grinned.

‘Something like what? Like my gas cylinder remaining perpetually full because of a holy sticker on it, or like driving my car from Lagos to Ibadan on an empty tank?’

Olu caught the joke and started laughing.



‘Yes, now. She said sign. Right?’ I continued, ‘Or, maybe I mistakenly heal somebody who has been blind from birth, or...’

‘Or you pray that God will help my Liverpool beat Barcelona tonight,’ Olu finished.

‘Amen to that, brother!’ I hooted, imitating a popular television evangelist.

We both burst into another round of laughter. Liverpool had lost the first leg of their Champions League clash with Barcelona by four goals to one a fortnight before, and their elimination from the competition was as assured as death and taxes.

An embarrassed Oyinda left us and returned to her computer.



After work, we watched the game in the office waiting room with some other members of staff. Liverpool won by four goals to nil, and a deliriously happy Olu would have kissed me if not for my preemptively balled fist.

Later that night, I got back home to meet a crowd gathered in front of House Number 23.

‘What happened,’ I asked no one in particular. Somebody I could not see was wailing.

‘Uncle Adeolu, welcome.’ Aunty Alice, the fat middle-aged madam who ran a beer parlor opposite my place was the one that stepped away from the throng and answered. Her badly bleached skin always reminded me of faded kampala, which was why I usually avoided her, that, and the whispers I’d heard that she liked boy toys. The only reason I knew her name was because it was boldly written on the front of her shop, and it was a surprise she knew mine.

‘Na Papa John.’

Doesn’t this man get tired of fighting with his wife?

‘Papa John, e don beat im wife again? She get injury?’

I remembered seeing him heading toward the bathroom as I locked my door on my way out earlier in the day.

‘Papa John don die,’ she said, shaking her head.

Tobi Ojenike



Tobi Ojenike is a freelance writer from Lagos, Nigeria. She enjoys long walks, strawberry milkshakes, and reading Danielle Steele and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whom she hopes to meet someday. She is currently working on republishing her maiden book, *On Edge*. Tobi is available on [X](#) and [Instagram](#) at the handle @tobiojenike. Tobi's website is: <http://www.tobiojenike.com>.

Idunnu

The sounds from her mother's kitchen pierced the strangely silent house like a needle through a piece of cloth. Or like a hot knife sears through butter. There was something so weirdly satisfying about the calmness the silence brought, and an even weirder connection between the stillness and the peace she felt within her. The tall guava trees in her compound had the children of her neighbors and church members in a frenzy during its season as they all scramble for its fruits, which fall in abundance like the tree was tired of them tugging at her and just poured out her content for their satisfaction, moved with sheer reluctance.

The silence itself was not particularly strange because it was a Saturday evening and usually, it was bursting with visitors and unfamiliar voices echoing in their living room, hallway, and sometimes, kitchen. It felt strange because she could feel the tiredness of the day, the trees sighing when the wind touched them, moving lazily like they were being coerced to do it. More like they were tired of their job and wanted to do what humans did for a change. Work and pay bills. Or at least that was the only thing she thought they did not do yet. Still, she wondered how anyone would want to live that way; work all day, eat, pay bills, work some more, get a couple of days off work, and feel bad while at it because you think you do not deserve it, and eventually die. That was such a pathetic way to live.

Their Saturday mostly involved seeing unfamiliar faces and hearing unfamiliar voices of people who had come to ask her dad for one thing or another. Sometimes, they were semi-familiar because they were people from her church or people she at least knew by their children's names. The other day, Papa Nkechi had tearily come to seek help concerning his failing crops in the village. She wondered why he had his family in the city while his means of livelihood was in the village.

'Everybody wants to live in the city, you know.' Her sister once said to her. His wife, whom everyone called Mama Nkechi, roasted corn and pear and sold them at a junction about three blocks away from the church, close to the commercial hub of their town. There was usually a throng of people in the evening around her fireplace and she made quite some money from the business, or so she thought the few times she had seen her selling. She did not think anyone should live like that, living from hand to mouth. Or maybe she assumed this because she came from a place of privilege and did not have to worry about these things.

She had never seen her parents seeking assistance from other people or being short on funds; they took care of everything, including feeding, clothing, and schooling. She did her hardest to avoid taking a stance on anyone, but she also believed that everyone should make an effort to improve their current condition.



And if there was no one physically talking to him about assisting financially, her father was on the phone with someone, and he always looked so serious while at it. It was not a new sight. It was not always pleasant either. Unpleasant because these people sometimes felt entitled and were too demanding. Not that her father was complaining but on their behalf, she had some shame since they refused to have some for themselves. But as Pastor Ike said every Sunday, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' often accompanying it with a song about helping people and not looking down on them.

Most Sundays, she was stunned when, upon starting the song, Pastor Ike would turn and look at her father, who usually sat at the first pew of the church, just beside her mother in matching attire. She and her siblings were in the next pew. A visitor would almost think they



were there for a special event – a family thanksgiving or some sort but no, that was their Sunday tradition.

It was almost like the church worshiped her father because of his wealth and affluence and she hated it. She hated how her peers would cower whenever she was around them and try to be on their best behavior like that would erase the ill they spoke of her father's source of wealth or tried to befriend her in the hopes of financial support or assistance from her father, either to work in his company despite their under qualification or to come live with her in their 'mansion'.

She always wondered about the level or manner of confidence these people had when they approached her father for a job and upon asking them about their highest level of education, they responded with 'I just finished WAEC, sir'.

'WAEC?' she had blurted out loudly once with her eyes wide open, when she stayed with her father during one of his 'sessions'. She had been so shocked by the response that the word just slipped out of her mouth before she could even stop herself from saying it. The shock in her eyes could jumpstart a dead car battery.

Her father looked at her and as if by telepathic communication, she got up, said a quick 'oh sorry, excuse me.' and left the room still in complete shock as to what had happened and what she had heard. The young lad from then on refused to speak to her. He must have been embarrassed, she had thought to herself when the following Sunday, she said hi to him and she got the coldest stare there was to give.

The best she had seen was a young guy in his mid-twenties, or so she thought, who was in his second year of Ordinary National Diploma at the polytechnic opposite her father's office. It was not much, but she admired his resilience in the pursuit of education and was even more impressed when he continued his studies after completing his one year of industrial training at her father's company. Her father had promised him employment upon graduating from the polytechnic. She really wished he never did.

She thought it odd whenever Pastor Ike immediately suggested her father's name to fill the position of the building committee chairman or the supervisor of the welfare team or even the director of the medical team. She once asked her father if he had any medical experience. He simply rolled his eyes at her and told her mother to 'warn your daughter' right in the middle of service, just before the thanksgiving offerings were to be collected, where her father proceeded to drop his fat white envelope, holding it high for the whole church to see, as though he owed them that display.

Sometimes she wondered if he truly worshipped God because of who He is or because he wanted to show off his wealth to the church or prove a point that she did not understand. Twenty-six years of her life and she still could not decipher who this man she called her father was.



A typical Saturday in their home usually started with a loud bell being rung around the house by her mother, followed by shouts of 'wake up for devotion'. That bell had been around for as long as she could remember. It had become so old but the jingle of it was still as startling and loud as ever. But not for once did Idunnu understand the need to shout in the morning.

She would rather be awakened softly, spoken to gently, or lightly tugged at to wake up. Most times, she was awake before her mother's bell even sounded. But her mother would open her room door still, ring her bell as loudly as she could and leave it ajar after shouting her usual line. She had told her mother on several occasions to try to close her door whenever she was leaving her room but was always met with 'this is my house' in response.

Tobi Ojenike

Her mother's voice was shrill and rather too loud for her small body. Everything about her mother's body was exaggerated, for all she cared. Her smooth round face and a jaw so sharp it could cut through the glass were her favorite features about her mother. But her eyes held a different opinion on disciplining her children.

The legendary eye-rolling and stare that got her children into character was something that fascinated her. The skill, the mastery, and the power behind it. It worked every time and she was always amazed at every exchange of it that she got to experience. Just her mother staring at them as if telepathically twisting their ears like she would do at home to bring back their home training since they seem to have forgotten their roots. The thought of the pain from the twist was a motivator to get out of her bed every morning before her mother came a second time.



A loud song of worship from her father kickstarts the devotion, followed by a long message which usually lasts about an hour. In all fairness, she never thought of her father as a preacher or a teacher but rather as a speaker. All he ever said was basic knowledge, not exactly preaching the word of God as Pastor Ike did. Just morality with a dash of spirituality. Sometimes, she wondered if he wanted to become a seminarian and was just practising with them. But she knew he would do badly at it because of his love for the display of his wealth and wanting to do things in the house of God just so people praise him.

The closing prayer was usually said by her cousin, Bintu, and the grace was shared by her younger sister, Abiye. She and Bintu were not the best of friends and this tension between them crossed into even devotion when she struggled to say amen to Bintu's prayers every time she led the closing. Immediately after the sharing of the grace, everyone moved to their chore station as Romola, her younger brother and the last child of her parents, had once described it. It was where they did their daily chore so it might as well be called that, he had said to detail his description, feeling so proud he had come up with something that his sister had considered interesting and did not tell her 'No Romo, you don't say that', or 'That is not correct, why don't you look at it this way.' and then she would go on to explain how better he could have approached the matter or done it. Not that he was mad at her for doing that.

He enjoyed it, the fact that she was always there to hold his hand and guide his fifteen-year-old self through life. But sometimes, he just wanted to explore his creativity and be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. He was a rather quiet child. Not that being quiet was bad, she just did not want him to grow up timid and not be able to voice his opinions or stand his ground on matters that mattered. Or worse, not being able to stand up for himself due to his shyness. He thought he was never seen or noticed, but she always looked out for him. This was why his statement surprised Idunnu, who was further shocked when he gave that explanation. She understood his struggles as a high school student and tried to have a conversation with him at every chance she got. She was almost like his counselor or his soundboard as he called her. Whatever he called her, she was content. The goal was to get him to be comfortable talking to her anytime about anything and it was working.

She assisted her mother in the kitchen with breakfast, Romola washed the cars and tended to the Calathea flowers in their rather large compound, and Abiye swept and cleaned the sitting and dining areas while Bintu cleaned her parent's room. She had always wondered why her cousin was the one saddled with the task of cleaning her parent's room, and when she asked her mother, 'It is your father's choice' was her curt response. Curt because her mother had looked at her with disgust as if taken aback by her boldness to question her father's authority in the house. Could she not ask her mother a question again? She questioned silently as she looked away from her mother to the furry rug that she sat on in their room that Sunday afternoon.





Shortly after breakfast, their gates were opened to the throng of people who most times started lining up there from as early as 5 am and stayed back till as late as 7 pm. Sometimes, her parents tasked her and Bintu with cooking for some of them who ate and even took some home, or sometimes, were given foodstuff to take home with them.

As much as she loved how her parents were helping the less privileged, their entitlement disgusted her. One time, a young woman had asked her for money to pay her son's school fees. Idunnu told her to meet her father but the woman was not ready to do that and told her, *'So you wan tell me say you no get money for hand as your papa get money reach?'* Idunnu was taken aback not only by her rudeness but also, by her sense of entitlement.

This Saturday, however, was different. Her father had fallen ill from work on Thursday and had been on bed rest ever since. The devotion that morning was rather solemn; her mother did not ring her bell, and she did not shout either. Rather, she knocked on their doors, opened and beckoned them to come downstairs for devotion. For a moment, Idunnu thought her dream of a solemn, slow wake morning had finally come true before she realized why this was happening.

The devotion that morning was quick too, her father did not join and she and her siblings heaved a sigh of relief when after the sermon, her mother started the closing prayer, giving no room for Bintu to take it. Abiye had slightly opened her eyes and winked at Idunnu, whose eyes were wide open and they shared a sinister smile. Chores were also done solemnly and this time, Idunnu and her cousin were in the kitchen cooking while her mother tended to her father upstairs.



'Be wary of Bintu. I am not sure of her ways,' her mother had once told her and she instantaneously remembered this when Bintu reached to add something to the pot of stew that was cooking over the gas cooker when they had to cook that evening. Her instincts kicked in and she moved quickly to hold her hand before she could add it.

'What is that?' she asked quite sharply, grabbing Bintu's wrist firmly. Bintu was shocked, taken aback by her sudden movement. She staggered a bit, and struggled for balance. There was a look in her eyes that Idunnu could not exactly place. It looked like hot coals of fire burned in her pupils and ashes filled her iris. But Idunnu was not moved. She stood grounded and still held on to her wrist.

'It's curry powder,' Bintu responded quite sharply before adding 'Why did you grab my hand like that?' and rolling her eyes at her cousin. Bintu did not particularly like Idunnu's doggedness and rather fascinating bravery. She thought a woman should be gentle and submissive and rather cower at the sight of her husband or any man at that, but Idunnu was different. She embodied all the opposites of her feminine characteristics, acted like a man, and questioned a lot of things, particularly regarding their norms and traditions and she did not like it.

'Oh. I thought it was salt because I already added salt,' Idunnu replied, slowly releasing Bintu's wrist from her grip.

That was a lie, and they both knew it.

Their facial expressions showed that. Bintu eyed her but she paid no attention and the rest of the cooking was done in silence. The sound of pots being scrapped as a result of the jollof rice getting burnt and spoons hitting the pots, stirring soups at intervals pierced the deafening silence that had taken over their house. Even the visitors were minimal today, and their visits were very brief. Her father needed all the rest he could get. He worked too hard and Idunnu sometimes pitied him whenever she got up at around midnight, majorly owing to insomnia.

Tobi Ojenike

Once, she had set out to make herself a glass of warm milk and saw his study room light on. Her father always worked round the clock on most weekdays, working on a proposal or speaking to his business partners on the other side of the globe. She stood outside his study, observing him for a while before going in to give him the glass of milk she had made for herself, and he smiled at her thoughtfulness, looked proud at the daughter he had raised, and said, 'God bless you.' She felt proud that she had done something to ease the stress he was going through and went to bed, without making another glass of warm milk for herself.

'Mummy said you should set the table for dinner', Abiye said quite grandly as she swayed into the kitchen with not a care to spare for whoever heard her. She moved to the fridge and brought out an apple.

'She also said Mr Harrison is coming over to pick up the vegetable soup she asked you to make for his wife,' she continued as she took a big bite of the apple in her hand, resting against the door of the fridge. Her sister and cousin continued their work and paid her no attention. Abiye looked from her sister to her cousin and from her cousin to her sister, both acted like they had not heard a word of what she said.

'Hello?' she yelled and both of them looked at her. 'Did any of you hear what I said?' she continued, looking from one person to the other.

'Which one of us were you talking to? Is that how to talk to people?' Bintu asked, a bit too harshly. Idunnu did not like that. She had no right to speak to her sister like that.

'Yes, we heard you. We will set the table and pack the vegetable soup soon,' she interjected as she looked at Bintu and stressed the 'we' in her sentence.

'Please take these dishes to the table. I will bring in the other one,' she continued, gesturing at the large blue ceramic dishes on the kitchen island. Abiye moved toward the island and opened the lid of one of the dishes. The aroma of the jollof rice in it filled the room as the steam rose to fill her nostrils. She closed her eyes for a couple of seconds and inhaled so sharply that her sister almost thought she wanted to sniff the rice through her nostrils. She simply savored the aroma before putting the lid back on and taking it to the dining area as instructed by her big sister.

'You should help Abiye set the table, I will finish washing the plates.' Bintu said to Idunnu rather calmly. As much as that sounded like a nice gesture, Idunnu had her doubts but she did as Bintu said. She washed her hands and joined Abiye at the dining table, setting down the plates for dinner.

They spoke in low tones about the food, their parents, the house, and the silent but quite visible tension between Bintu and Idunnu.

'I don't think I understand her problem. She thinks we should worship her because Daddy is her uncle and we are only privileged to be his children. What manner of sick thought is that?' she had said to Abiye, who then responded, '*I wonder o*'.

'To a large extent, I think Daddy is accommodating her excesses. It's becoming too much. I understand her father helped him rise up but then, there should be a boundary and Daddy does not seem to know where to set it,' Idunnu continued.

'I think he is scared of Uncle Dele. If he isn't, Bintu will not be getting away with so much and he will be supporting her,' Abiye shared as she moved to put the final touches on the setting.

'I also don't understand why mummy is not doing anything about this,' Idunnu continued. 'It is not the best sight to see what she is doing but...'. She caught Abiye's eyes, the silent message that said, 'Bintu is here and she is behind you.'



Swiftly, she turned, smiled at her, and collected the last dish in her hand to put on the table.

‘Please tell Mummy and Daddy the table is set. They can come downstairs now. Call Romola on your way back too so we can all eat.’ Idunnu dished out the instructions to her sister and from the corner of her eye, she could tell Bintu was a bit upset. She would have wanted to do that, take charge, and give instructions, but Idunnu was doing that and she could feel her rage building up.

‘Yes, call them. I was about to tell you that,’ she quickly added before Abiye could turn to leave.

‘Yes, Auntu Bintu’, Abiye responded and walked away. One could almost hear the sarcasm and detest in her voice as she replied to her cousin whom her father had mandated she added the prefix, Auntu, to her name when addressing her. She was beyond shocked the first time he mentioned it to her over dinner on a windy Thursday evening. He looked her straight in the eye and she remembered how his eyes had looked that day. Calm, holding no emotions.

He said it so casually she almost thought it was a joke. She had laughed and he added, ‘Share the joke, Abiye’ and continued to look straight into her eyes as he expected a response but got none.

Everyone at the table instantly became quiet as if struck by something that she neither saw nor knew of. She knew he was serious about what he had said and was not playing around. She would have objected and said something like she always did if it had been her mother.

But it was Chief Kolawole Enitan. Her father. The revered one. The feared one. Nobody questioned him, his decisions, or his choices. Not even his wife, or children. His continued stare was her cue to not speak anymore and she responded with a very quiet ‘Yes, daddy’, almost a whisper. Dinner that night was solemn and quiet. One could almost hear her heart beating as it raced against her breath, having heard her father’s stern voice. She hated to hear it. She never liked it. He had only spoken to her in that manner roughly five times in her twenty years on Earth.

Stern yet gentle a voice.

She hated to hear him speak to her that way. And it was because of her cousin, Bintu.

‘Don’t worry.’ She heard Idunnu whisper as she lightly squeezed her hand under the table.

But Bintu, who sat across her, smiled, sipping her water with so much pride. Reveling in the glory her uncle had just won for her.

She remembered how Bintu came to stay in their house, initially as a holiday of two weeks, being the best-behaved young woman she had seen. Then, two weeks stretched into two months, two months stretched into two years, and now it had been almost six years since the day Bintu moved in with them. In those six years, they had changed houses twice and she was still there. She had asked her once within the first year of her stay if she was going back to her parents or not. Bintu gave her a very demeaning look and sucked her teeth so hard she, for a second, thought her tongue might bleed from all that force pressing into her teeth. Bintu was about nine months older than her and somehow, she managed to use that every time they argued. ‘I am not your mate.’ She was always reminded and she would wonder how exactly she meant, exerting so much power and authority in her own father’s home.

Idunnu knew from that moment onward that Bintu was not going to be anywhere near her good books.

Israel Lumile



Israel Lumile is a 31-year-old South African who lives in Durban, KwaZulu Natal. He is studying theology and religious studies so he can be a pastor, as he sees that it is his destiny to change the spiritual character of the world. He has found that sermons are powerful with storytelling, for it is a way of relating with the audience, and it can be congregated with real-life experiences told.

Journey of Own

Chapter 1: The Wind is Trapped

This is the door to Makani's apartment. You are the narrator of this story. Today, you will meet Makani at the house you are standing in front of. In a few moments, you will begin to understand. First, observe the outside. You must pay attention to the details so you can understand what is happening inside Makani's life.

The apartment is small. It is for a youth trying to find their own independence and identity in the context of a wild, unprocessed life. It is a charming apartment at first glance, yet it also starts to seem neglected as you look closer. Its windowsills are corroding brown and splintered from the brackish sea air, while pot plants at the doorstep have become bushy and confused. At the front of the apartment are two windows: one belongs to the kitchen and the other belongs to the living room and both are closed at eleven o'clock in the morning. It seems that the resident of the apartment doesn't want to welcome anyone at this time. But you, who are observing outside and standing on the doorstep of the apartment of Makani, are ready to enter and understand.

You safely open the front door and walk inside. As you enter, it is like familiarizing yourself with a dark forest since the interior of the apartment has little that shines and little light. Yet the ambience is not sinister or menacing at all. As you walk steadily inside, it simply tends to deny visitors or advise them that the resident of the apartment is not in a good mood and ready to entertain another person. Forward you go, a few steps ahead, and you turn towards a doorway to observe the state of the kitchen, exclaiming at the sight to yourself. Nevertheless, you still investigate. You see three dirty, empty pizza boxes. They are really snack products made into dinner. Two boxes are on the kitchen counter and the other last one is in the kitchen sink. And inside the kitchen sink, sharing the space with the pizza box, is a stained champagne glass with yester night's wine. Horribly, one meter away from the sink and scattered across the kitchen floor is a shattered bottle of wine. After your second exclamation, you pull your sight away from the kitchen, and as you are doing this, your eyes pass over a photograph of Makani celebrating her father's 70th birthday with him at his house, eating the birthday cake, just the two of them. You stop and stare at the picture for a few seconds and then continue away from the kitchen.

You slowly walk further into the house and towards the living room, while the television, which has been on the whole night, is still playing a heartthrob movie on a romance channel. You look at the sofa, where it seems Makani sat last night, and you then see a motivational magazine lying open at an article 'Strong and Independent'. Suddenly, your attention is alerted when you hear a buzzing, chiming cell phone. Every two or so minutes, a new message arrives, and the tone of the cell phone's messaging system starts to feel obnoxious and disturbing as it persistently repeats. Near the phone is a half-eaten slab of chocolate lying in pieces, making a mess on the sofa. You observe for a while and then pass by.

The last door you will open is Makani's bedroom. You are left to confront it, sensing an ambience that is not sinister or menacing at all, but it still feels like it would rather deny visitors entry. You are left to confront it, nevertheless, and the door gives way, slowly unlocking as if on its own, yielding to your curiosity. The door slowly widens, but then stops half-open and becomes stuck, as if it has gained the weight of a boulder too large for you to move. Even an army of war veterans would find difficulty in pushing such an obstacle. You then conclude that no one is invited inside Makani's bedroom, which is correct.

Through the space left to look inside the bedroom, you see mostly dingy darkness caused by the closed curtains, but you can identify chaotic contours across the bed of some writhing soul lying wrapped inside the duvet. And you, the visitor and narrator, assume correctly when you identify the person sleeping coldly, alone and sad as the mess Makani, the exhausted Wind.

**Chapter 2: Observe Makani's Face as She Prepares**

In the room, blurred by the darkness and meaninglessness, Makani was covered by the duvet and her life problems. Her body turned, jolted, and then continued restlessly on the bed. Makani had to wake up eventually, one way or another, even though she didn't want to leave her warm bed. The world wouldn't cease for her; it was not too chivalrous, which was the knowledge she had come to learn.

Makani did not want to be awake, but she was semi-conscious. In her semi-slumber, she hadn't opened her eyes yet to face reality. She covered her face with the duvet to try and hide from the preordained truth of the world but not to escape it by committing suicide. Because who would take care of her old father if she did kill herself? Who would tell her old man that someone loved him and would always remember his birthday? Makani was the only child of David. Their closest blood relatives were superficial with their care. They would only care about her father because it was what was nobly expected from her Hawaiian culture: take care of your relatives, the duty decreed.

Importantly, her mother, Anne, could not care for David, for she died years ago. Makani angers! Her mother never loved her father that much in any case, Makani believes, as she still angers in the cage made of cushions. If Anne had loved David that much, she would still be alive. But she forsook David and Makani for a new life. How could she?! Makani always became annoyed when she thought about her mother's doings. Makani sometimes felt her resentment was righteous when she cursed her own mother in her thoughts and proclaimed that it was fateful justice that she would not experience old age: the better days. Makani's forehead started showing wrinkles of distress while her eyelids were closed as she became tense. However, as troubles laden upon Makani's tormented soul, she still had to wake up. Makani had to open her eyes and wake up! And face her life.

Makani decided to count to ten so she could have the motivation to leave her bed. At the count of ten, she would get up from the bed as this seemingly trivial exercise had become a strong enough habit to start the day. In her tired whispers, she began, 'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten... ten... ten.' Makani said again, 'Ten.' But she was not yet motivated as her soft cushion on the bed was more comforting than the tough air of the world. She wanted to repeat the sequence again. However, she managed to move into a crouching position, finally getting up after she repeated the number ten as she was reminded about David, her poor, lonely father. Makani rose up but stayed seated on the bed.

She got up, put on her bedroom slippers, and trudged forward to start the day. In pyjamas, Makani walked towards her bedroom door. As she tried to pull it from the halfway position to open the door entirely, it wouldn't budge. In the corner at the top-right side of the rectangular bedroom door, there was a broken hinge that had needed fixing for months. Makani had not yet tried to do something about it. But the fine lady, aggressive and angry, pulled the door. By the force of her furious will, the door opened inward, slamming open all the way and banging the wall with the door hinge squealing. As tense as before, Makani's day now began as she exited her bedroom.



Makani had just finished showering, and she now stepped in front of the mirror above the bathroom sink. She gazed at her reflection vacantly, like she didn't want to engage with or understand it. The mirror could become an instrument that was more than just a cosmetic apparatus. A mirror could also create a moment of introspective self-realization. A moment of self-realization was a moment of understanding oneself. The mirror could be a place where a person confronted their own perception of their self, whether it was true or false. The mirror could reveal the facts, often unwanted, about oneself that we shy away from. For it could possibly strip away fantasies that the person had formed which idealized the self. It could inform us of the truth that other people were afraid to tell us. The mirror could be

where a person confronted their internal image. Makani was about to focus on her own reflection and see her true image, but she was triggered as she rushed away, having remembered something. She left the bathroom without really seeing into the image in the mirror.

Makani later returned to the bathroom, pacing back and forth inside with her phone in hand while she prepared herself for the day. She stopped in front of the mirror and posed for the camera as she took a selfie using her cell phone. Makani made wide grins as she tried to capture a moment of happiness, even if it was just a facade. She didn't want the world to see her vulnerability or the pain that resided within her. The selfie was a way to present a version of herself that was socially acceptable, a version that didn't reveal the inner turmoil she was experiencing.

After taking the selfie, Makani scrolled through social media, mindlessly liking and scrolling past posts of friends and acquaintances living seemingly perfect lives. Each picture and status update were a reminder of what she felt she lacked – happiness, success, and fulfilment. The comparison made her feel even more isolated and discontented.

As she continued to scroll, a particular post caught her attention. It was a photo of a serene beach with a caption that read, "Find peace within yourself." The words resonated with Makani as she yearned for inner peace. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to imagine herself in that tranquil setting, far away from her current reality.

But the moment was fleeting. The noise from outside, the demands of her job, and the weight of her responsibilities came crashing back into her consciousness. The image of the beach faded away, leaving behind a sense of longing.

Makani sighed and set her phone down. She knew that finding peace within herself was easier said than done. It required introspection, self-acceptance, and the courage to confront her fears and insecurities. It meant acknowledging her pain and working through it rather than burying it under a facade.

With a renewed determination, Makani decided to seek help. She reached out to a therapist who could guide her through the process of self-discovery and healing. She understood that finding inner peace was not a destination but a journey, and she was ready to embark on that journey.

As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, Makani slowly began to unravel the layers of her emotions. She confronted her past traumas, learned to let go of what she couldn't control, and embraced self-compassion. It was a challenging process, filled with ups and downs, but she persisted.

Over time, Makani started to notice a shift within herself. She began to find moments of peace amidst the chaos of life. She discovered strength in vulnerability and authenticity. Her sense of self-worth no longer relied on external validation but came from within.

The journey towards inner peace wasn't linear, and Makani still had her bad days. But she had learned to embrace the ebb and flow of life, knowing that true peace came from accepting both the light and the darkness within herself.

And as she stood in front of the mirror once again, Makani looked into her own eyes and saw a reflection of resilience and growth. She smiled, not for the camera this time, but for herself. She was still a work in progress, but she had come a long way on her journey towards finding inner peace.



Chapter 3: A Journey Begins with a Single Step

Makani enters Honolulu International Airport with a hubbub of travellers and tourists navigating through the commotion of the island airport. Makani is now following the congested tiled path along with other airport personnel.

She arrives at work about five hours before she is to serve on transnational flights to different countries across the globe. She works a chain of flights, so she can have a series of days off between work. From Honolulu, she will travel to capital cities of the world from Guatemala City in Guatemala to Sofia in Bulgaria, Antananarivo in Madagascar, and Manilla in the Philippines, and then eventually return to Honolulu. Makani will circumnavigate the globe from the west to the east, working and hopefully exploring. It will be a long and demanding trip, but Makani also wants to make time to spend with her father, who has no family around to care for him. She plans to spend some time going out, being spontaneous and reckless, trying to forget her obligations and responsibilities, and removing the bad sentiment of her failed engagement. Makani pulls a single bag on wheels behind her. She packs fewer items than before.

Makani thinks merely about doing her work and then returning as she paces forward. Though becoming unaware of it, she still drags baggage behind her. She stops and messages her colleagues, who have also become friends, with her phone and after seeing her message, they signal their presence by waving their arms at her as they sit at a table at a restaurant. Makani spots them and strolls calmly over to them.

‘Hey, guys!’ Makani says to her three friends.

‘Hey, Kay!’ Dakota replies, using Makani’s nickname. The friends greet one another with hugs and kisses.

Makani then starts talking: ‘So guys, how are you?’

‘We’re good,’ Dakota says.

‘Always marvellous,’ Ashikaa answers.

‘What can I say? These two ladies are a handful... Just teasing; we’re fine,’ Greg jokes.

Their discussion turns to reminiscing over a party three nights ago.

‘Guys, that was a ball,’ Makani says with surprisingly calmness.

‘Yeah, it was fun!’ Dakota exclaims.

Ashikaa adds, ‘Kay, girl, you can dance.’

‘Yeah, yeah, you all had fun while you left me and went to the dance floor. Leaving poor me alone to sit by myself,’ Greg plays.

‘Boy, learn to dance,’ Ashanti teases.

‘And get a girlfriend!’ Dakota joins.

‘Next time, I promise we won’t leave you, Gregg,’ Makani also teased, and they all laughed.

‘So, Dakota,’ Greg starts to gush without thinking about where he is going, ‘where’s Kelvin? And what about you, Ashikaa? You have been with Kongu for ten years! Why ain’t you accepting the man’s proposal?’

Ashikaa answers, ‘No, it’s just that Kongu wants to start a family while I am not ready yet. But... I will have to consider.’

‘Kelvin, guys...’ Dakota begins, ‘Kelvin got daddy issues, like when we get into a fight, he always threatens me that he will leave me like his father left him. Like, I can’t deal with that, so we’re not on speaking terms lately.’

Greg answers, ‘Okay I hear you. What about you, Makani? Akila’s...’. Greg blunders when he mentions the cheating ex-fiancé who broke Makani’s heart. The two women give Greg a harsh stare, communicating an attempt to discipline him, and then turn to console Makani, who is making an effort to smile and act normally.

‘Akila was not good for you,’ Dakota says.

‘Yes, girl, you are far too perfect for him,’ Ashikaa reassures Makani.

‘It’s okay, guys. I’m really fine,’ Makani says, ‘Like, he lives his life and I live my own... Did you see my posts earlier today? Like, I know Akila may be fuming when he saw them... Did you see the picture when I was dancing on the table? Best time of my whole life!’

Makani’s friends all stare at her for a short while and then quickly start to nod and congratulate Makani as a form of consolation. They clap their hands for Makani posting pictures of herself on her social media account in which she danced drunk on top of the table.

Makani grins, yet afterwards, she looks down and is a little ashamed. She then shrugs her feelings of regret off and smiles back at her friends.

Eventually, all the friends and plane attendants get up and give each other a group hug as they get ready for work. They say farewell to Makani when she informs them that she has to get ready for work.

Makani departs alone.

In the last hour before starting her work, Makani closes the door of her locker. She is thinking or maybe regretting that she broadcasted those nightclub pictures. She hopes that management does not see them because the thought crosses her mind briefly that she may be disciplined, or she may be embarrassed later. Would the pictures really antagonize Akila or become examples of her foolishness in the future? However, Makani is more worried about how the pictures will impact her father David if he sees them by some unlikely coincidence.

Unfortunately, what is happening, the conflict of conscience occurring, is wrong for Makani. All the moral turmoil is misplaced. For Makani is stressing about how the world sees her, while she should be worried about how she herself sees the world! The first help a person will find is through themselves. If she had a solution to the dilemma to how she responds to the challenges she meets in her life, her life would be much better. However, Makani doesn’t know the solution to such a dilemma and remains stressed.



Makani locks the door of her locker, and she then leaves for her next plane; leaving to find the solution – or a way around.

Chapter 4: When Love and the Heart are Separated

Makani smiles, Makani greets, and Makani serves on the plane headed to Guatemala City on which she is attending. Makani attends to the passengers with courtesy and professionalism. She walks with the trolley shelved with snacks, sandwiches and cold drinks down the aisle with all the seats demarcated on the length of the aircraft. As she attends to each passenger, Makani offers a variety of foods. Chicken or beef for the sandwiches, peanuts or potato chips for snacks, and different flavours for the drinks are all available at the leisure of the passengers. Passengers choose what they want. Some of the passengers she serves are good people with good manners, while others are selfish, narcissistic and display a ‘me-attitude’. This is a self-centred behaviour when one complains about anything – although most demands are unnecessary and trivial. But most passengers are busy with their own affairs, focusing on their phones on flight mode or watching programs on the onboard screens. Thus, Makani serves and gives professional grimaces to the distant passengers of the plane she attends.

After completing her duty serving, Makani is relaxing with her colleagues, when she is called to help an elderly man who has dropped his luggage and its contents on the floor. Makani hastens and helps him pick up the open suitcase and clothing hanging out from it. ‘Don’t worry sir,’ she says. ‘Take a seat. I will be of assistance.’ Makani folds the clothes and places them in his suitcase. When Makani is done, she pushes the suitcase into the overhead shelf and turns to the seated old man to check on him.

The old man assures Makani that he is fine, ‘Thank you, young lady. All is good now.’

Makani responds by saying, ‘Ok sir, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.’ As a formality, Makani also enquires whether the passengers who are sitting next to the old man need anything. All the passengers appreciate the offer but do not need assistance.

Then, one charming, playful young male passenger becomes flirty and the surrounding passengers chuckle when he says, ‘I also need help, especially my lonely heart.’

Makani takes the humour with a smile, but offers a retort to the male passenger and the surrounding passengers chuckle again after she says, ‘Sorry, mister, what you ask for, I cannot help with.’

Makani is ready to return to the front of the plane where her colleagues are seated. The male passenger, whose name is Juan, tries to charm Makani again by saying, ‘Very well, I respect a beautiful lady – a lady fair like you.’

As Makani walks away, she hears this compliment and stops, turns, and stares directly into Juan’s eyes. He is cheekily smirking; indeed, he is trying to swoon her. Makani looks at his face, analyses it, and is briefly mesmerized. Juan’s grin reminds her of ex-fiancé’s ways of charming her. Yet, Makani still smiles back at Juan and shows that she still appreciates his gesture.

The plane lands at its destination in Guatemala City. She meets Juan inside the airport, and they exchange phone numbers so as to develop a relationship. Makani finds Juan’s gestures so interesting and familiarly charming that she calls one of her friends, Becky, to talk about

him. Makani is rushing to her next plane, which will soon be headed to a new destination.

‘But Makani,’ Becky asks, ‘what made you like him?’

‘It’s just that Juan is fun and outgoing – like Akila,’ Makani remarks, ‘But Juan is also cute, like the beach type.’

‘Juan sounds like fun. Ok, so I get why you like him on the outside, but what other qualities did you see that you haven’t found in other guys?’

‘My friend, I feel like Akila is nothing compared to Juan. Like Juan is more charming and seems adventurous, I think he is a quick learner... While like the dumb Akila is too slow, he never listens... tortoises are much faster than him.’

Becky chuckles and takes the humour; however, she becomes serious in her tone as she says, ‘But sweetheart, Makani... How long since you spoke to Akila? Are you over him?... It’s like you still thinking about him. Akila this, Akila that.’

Makani is taken off-guard by these questions. ‘Me?! Thinking of that idiot... I don’t care about him! He means nothing!’ Makani becomes angry as she says, ‘He is the one who ruined a perfect eight-year relationship for one stupid promiscuous night!’ She quickly feels tired and says, ‘Becky, I have to go. I’m getting late for work.’

Makani ends the call, frustrated. She is looking down at her phone as she switches it off while rushing, but her mind is still fixed on Becky’s words. Makani is still thinking about Akila. She is still struggling to forget the relationship. Suddenly, Makani realizes that Juan seems so similar to Akila. She is afraid to accept the truth that Akila still plays a pivotal role in her well-being and her life. With this reality confronted, the bare truth comes rushing in, full speed towards Makani. She rushes and rushes ever faster to flee from it.



While pacing across the airport, still looking down at her blank phone, Makani accidentally bumps into a person. She is pushed backwards, but two steady arms belonging to a man named Joe gently rescue and pull her up. The two both look at each other’s eyes. Joe looks longer at Makani, who averts her eyes as a means to break up the establishment of any chemistry between them. She quickly picks up her phone lying on the ground. Makani apologizes for the accident and Joe also apologizes as the two of them stand while rearranging themselves and their luggage to look busy.

Makani turns away and rushes off to her plane. She quickens her pace, but Joe follows her for a few paces. He stops and says, ‘Hello, sorry to bother you, miss, but I’m Joe. I think we are going to the same place... maybe the same plane. I would like to meet up with you again, if you want to.’ Joe speaks with his heart filled with anticipation and fear, hoping to get the contact details of the beautiful woman, and maybe a date.

Makani is distracted, but she seems to appreciate Joe’s manners. ‘Ok, I can make some time. Here’s my number. But I have to go. Goodbye.’

The two separate, only to meet again later on.

Makani and Joe board the plane to Sofia, Bulgaria, and over the next few days, Makani meets up with Joe on dates when she is off work. Late one afternoon, after going to the movies



together, they stroll down a bridge side by side, with the colours and light from the sky becoming intoxicating and wonderful. A pair of good humans looking to understand more about each other, walking and talking. Both are smiling. There is a good relationship between Makani and Joe as they spend the day together. They are neither too close and intimate nor too far apart from each other. They are respecting each other's boundaries healthily, and so get to know each other naturally. Such an environment creates a good opportunity to discuss general but somewhat revealing topics. Joe walks and then asks Makani about a treat of the day.

'Did you enjoy the movie?' Joe enquires.

Makani gladdens, 'Yes, I did.'

Joe is relieved and happy. 'Okay, good. I thought that women don't like the bravado, macho-man action movies.'

Makani becomes friendly-sarcastic. 'Yes, women do love movies where a man is a leader who always dominates other men and has many lovers, drives the fanciest cars, and is always arrogant, and has explosions blasting with him nonchalantly walking away from the scene... I think every woman loves such a movie.'

Joe smiles. 'Okay, I get the point, but it's just entertainment. But thanks for watching it with me.'

Makani smiles. 'Okay.'

'So, are you in a relationship, Makani?'

'Love...? I will have to pass that topic. My ex... is such a disappointment,' Makani says, for she remembers her and Akila enjoying late afternoons like today, when he would have spoilt her on the most romantic date, departing from the movies while eating cotton candy and laughing while holding each other's hands. Makani begins to miss Akila, but she sighs and says instead, 'He is so cruel... Men always disappoint when everything is going well.'

'Not every man is a bad person. What did your ex do to you?'

'Can we not talk about it?'

'Okay... I respect that.'

The two have walked a while and are now arriving at the hotel where Makani is staying. Both stand at the entrance and are now facing each other. Joe then says before they part ways, 'Makani, it seems like your ex broke your heart dearly. My mom always says a man should put a woman first. That is what I believe in. What I am saying is that I don't disappoint the love of my life.'

'You are a good man, Joe, and you have a good mother.'

'What Makani... that I'm trying to say...'

Makani knows where Joe is going, so she interrupts. 'Sorry Joe, it's getting late. I have a shift tomorrow.'

Makani refuses to allow Joe to make any further romantic advances towards her and she begins to leave. Joe looks sad and disheartened.

‘Can I phone you later, Makani? Maybe meet up again?’ Joe seeks any form of solace from the interest of his heart. But the love still flies away to the blue sky, escaping. A future with Makani, however, looks dim.

‘Sure, maybe. Goodnight Joe.’

‘Goodbye, Makani.’

Joe stands.

Makani departs.

Chapter 5: At the Feet of Wisewomen

In the morning the next day, at the hotel she is staying, Makani cleans up the side closet and her cosmetics. She picks up assorted items and places them into her purse, but as she does this, she finds a ring. Not the engagement ring that Akila give her, which she threw at his face when she discovered his infidelity that fateful night. This ring is plain and functional because it plays a particular purpose in society. She places the plain ring on one of her fingers. Makani’s cell phone buzzes with messages from the two men she has met over the past few days, Juan and Joe.

Juan’s message is a photo of him at a night bash party inviting Makani to meet up with him when she is in Guatemala again, while Joe’s message tells Makani that he is sorry for intruding into her love life, but he states that he is still interested in her, and would wait for her. The messages Makani are enticing. However, they are also destructive because all the while, Makani thinks that a relationship with one of them could somehow improve her love life. She realizes she could develop a relationship with one of them with the wrong intentions. Makani becomes responsible and mature in her decision because she knows that if she starts a relationship with one of them, the reason would be Akila: whether it would be spiting Akila about having someone new or trying to forget Akila through having the new attention. All the reasons are motivated by Akila.

Meanwhile, Makani stares at Juan’s and Joe's messages, and then she stares back at the plain ring. The plain ring’s function is to be put on her engagement finger so she could not be judged negatively by society. That she has failed in love and that she was not strong enough for marriage. Makani stares at the messages and the ring. But Makani slides the ring into her engagement finger. However, she leaves voicemails to both Juan and Joe, informing them that she will not have any relationship with them any longer. Makani then deletes their contacts. She proceeds on and Makani closes the hotel door and she left.

The airplane to Antananarivo is silent with Makani inside sitting after her servicing has been done. The plane is that silent, even the passengers are solemn. Makani’s down spirit spreads throughout the plane. It is a plane travelling to a tropical paradise, yet it feels like it is a space for mourning. But the plane flies and glides through the ocean blue sky with brushes of white clouds flowing still. When with an opening in the thin vapours of clouds displayed by the atmospheric conditions, the turquoise sea shows, with sprinkled coloured corals and the most beautiful beach reveals itself welcoming. A picturesque showing of sparkling seas girdling the emerald-green jewel is a sight of wonder. The plane has arrived in Madagascar,



its destination. But wondering through a window, Makani just stares, unimpressed. Makani is done for her work shift, her colleagues from Madagascar and with her homeland friends: Greg, Ashikaa and Dakota they all decide to go for a small vacation in the huge island. Her friends convinced Makani numerous times to join them, and she has finally accepted the requests in due course. Makani and her friends decide to take a tour bus so to explore the best locations in the island. As the young folks climb into the long bus when it fetches them in their hotel, the group is amazed when they climb into the bus and find that the driver of the heavy transport is a middle-aged woman, which is a rare witness in their lives.

The woman greets them, 'Good morning, good morning, come inside, all of you, let go and find the happiness of the island.' The group passes the cheerful woman bus driver and picks seats to sit on while all acting hysterical – gaping their mouths towards themselves – as they see a novelty compared to the usual lives back home, a middle-aged woman driving a colourful tour bus. Makani is on the steps entering the bus when the middle-aged woman bus driver, Zee stares and stares for uncomfortable seconds at the distant face of Makani. With Makani averting her intrusive look. As Makani walks inside and enters the bus, passing Zee, Zee stops Makani as she grasps her arm with Makani being confused to the borderline of being agitated. But the smiling Zee just says with a smile, 'You worry too much Child. Don't worry too much, come inside the happy bus Child. Child, come inside; forget what is behind you.' Makani is confused and irritated because she finds Zee being presumptuous about her life while Zee doesn't have knowledge. What makes Makani upset also is that Zee is commanding her that she should enter the bus when she is already on board, inside! A confusing and seemingly patronizing gesture, Makani thinks. Though Makani pretends to smile in a patronizing manner herself at Zee and she moves on forward and she go and sits and joins her friends while informing them that the bizarre woman thinks she has insight about her life

Zee drives the group of friends with some tourists through the island with her colourful bus, with short parking to show them places of interest and any spectacle. In one event, Zee sees something to be amazed that she parks the bus on the side of the road, and she leaves the driver's seat while calling out her passengers to come and join her on her witnessing. The people are outside now and standing with Zee at side of the road curious. And Zee points a rare bird that is pulling up from its eggs and leaving them so it could find food. The tourists and the group of friends take photographs of the event. Then Zee teaches the people what kind of rare species of bird it is, but she focuses on its behaviour. Zee lectures as she points and educates the tourists. 'Look! Even when the bird is a very special bird, but it leaves its very special eggs, that can be ruined by its enemies so to find food. The special bird is not a bad parent. But the special bird is very special. Because it has faith that its very special eggs will be protected by the nature of God.' Zee turns and stares at Makani among the preoccupied tourists and commands her a lesson. 'Child, don't worry too much. Be special, like the special bird.'

The tour bus finishes its tour at the island. The group of Makani's friends are now exiting the bus as they step outside. As like before, Makani is the last of the group to follow then Zee at the driver's seat spots her and waits for her and when Makani is about to pass her, she grasps her arm again as before with Makani being startled once more. Zee with a beautiful, optimistic smile again says, 'Child, you worry too much. Don't worry too much, Child. Now go outside to the happy world and be very special – be like the special bird.' Makani looks at Zee with pensive. Wondering about the advice.

The group of friends are now at a festival at night, with firecrackers glistening the festival and parading displays ambling down the road. Makani is watching with locals the festival far

from her friends. In her hand, Makani holds a tiny teddy bear keyring which she was gifted by her mother, Anne before she had divorced David after a 50-year-old marriage. Anne's reason for the separation after five decades of matrimony was that she was not happy anymore. Anne then later on found a new spouse, and while both were going for a date night together, they were tragically involved in a car accident that became a fatality for both of them. Makani has resentment for her mother even when she has gone. Makani is still mad for Anne because she feels that Anne selfishly deserted her and her father David to find her new life. But the teddy bear keyring is a reminder of Anne before the divorce, when the good memories were still alive; when everything seemed better.

Makani's teddy bear keyring dangles in her hand when suddenly there is a rough tug that she investigates. Makani catches a little girl pulling and screaming for her possession like it was hers. Makani slowly becomes infuriated over time, and she shouts at the little girl to release her keyring teddy bear but the little girl screams even louder until the attention from the people is drawn to the fray. Both females pull each other for the teddy bear keyring with people murmuring because they don't understand what is going on. The little girl screams and pulls, and Makani shouts and pulls; the people do not understand both of them.

From a short distance, an angry old woman from the market comes rushing in to instil order. She arrives at the struggle and then confusingly starts chastising Makani's hand with disciplining slaps. The old woman from the market carries on, slapping the hand of Makani trying to let her relinquish the teddy bear keyring. With power diminishing on her strength, Makani finally let go of the teddy bear keyring and the little girl flees, running with the teddy bear keyring until she was lost in sight, nowhere to be found. In sorrow, Makani bursts and complains with shouting at the old woman from the market about her loss: 'What's wrong with you?! That was mine! That was important to me!' Makani is horrible in her scorn; she wants the old woman from the market to feel the hurt of losing the teddy bear keyring. For the teddy bear keyring keeps Makani warm inside.

However, the old woman from the market also releases her angry response. 'Learn to let go...! Learn to let go...! Learn to let go!' the old woman from the market says and persists with the same words with Makani staring furiously. Over time, Makani slowly starts to realize the meaning of the words, but only to the point of accepting the words. The words teach Makani that she has to learn to let go of the experiences that she treasures at the past as the old woman from the market advises her. But Makani doesn't feel like she wants to relinquish those priceless moments, so she turns around and she marches away to look for her friends. Not to reunite with her friends, but to flee from the advice.

Chapter 6: Makani confronts Fate

The mood is grey, like the empty clouds at the sky. The shine of the sun is dipping, and its light shines as a goodbye for the gleam in the tarmac of the runway of Manila's airport is becoming orange amber in colour. It is the sunset at the Philippines airport and the last leg of Makani's journey around the world. The plane is destined to go back to Hawaii, her homeland soon. As the trip which Makani took as a job duty has now become a tale of the revealing of one's soul and self-perception. Now Makani is to return home to reveal the change she has confronted. With that, Makani is now walking devoid at the runway towards the plane that she will serve. She is bearing the relief that her duty is coming to an end. Soul-searching is a difficult experience. However, faith is not an impossible task. Yet scarily, Makani has been thinking of morbid thoughts lately, even malicious in character. She is finding no reason to go back home, she cannot go back to those backbreaking burdens, that heaviness. Makani refuses to go back home and face her life. Her father, David and her



friends, Ashikaa, Dakota and Greg must find it in their hearts to forgive her and hopefully carry on with their lives, because Makani, tonight, on the plane she is attending, she is going to end her life; Makani plans on committing suicide.

A quiet Makani places a plate delicately on the cart, expecting that it was the last time she will be doing this with the plane far into the sky. The plane soon starts jolting and shaking as the turbulence starts. Makani trembles with the passengers while she continues to stroll down the passage of the plane as the plane drifts in the night. Makani reaches her friends and colleagues as she places the cart in the kitchen. She solemnly walks up to her friends and gives each one personally a hug. All the friends smile yet are dumbfounded for such bizarre behaviour. Makani smiles and says goodbye and exits the kitchen while holding a medication bottle in her hand.

Makani walks until she enters the bathroom and locks it. Makani is at a tiny, squeezing space, she is forced to face the mirror above the sink. Then finally, Makani stares directly at her reflection. Makani looks and makes eye contact with the woman, staring her back through the mirror. Both women do not recognize each other. Both women are seeing shells of beautiful ladies. Momentarily afterwards, Makani averted her eyes from her reflection and poured pills from the medication bottle into her hand. As the hill of pale pills swelled in her hand, Makani could slightly hear commotion brewing from the passengers on the plane. But that situation is not her concern anymore, Makani decides.

As Makani tries to convince herself to commit the scary act as the medication bottle is empty now, she is startled when she hears women screeching from the passengers. But again, it is not her concern anymore, she says. As her hand filled with death-inducing pills lifts towards her opening mouth, Makani is disturbed when the bathroom door is repeatedly knocked as Greg calls out Makani for an emergency from the passengers. Makani stops! And she sighs. Makani downhearted, places the pills back into the medication bottle to reschedule her death later on. Then she exits to attend the emergency.

Makani arrives at the commotion, which consists of nervous passengers and traumatized passengers, the terrified staff and, while a few intrigued passengers, are busy recording videos with their phones on the reason for the commotion. At the centre of the hysteria, with a space between the seats, a man named Fiji is carrying a gun, which is a puzzle to how he entered the plane with it from tight-knit security at the airport. Nevertheless, with the gun Fiji is pointing it on his head, afraid and threatening on the people that he will trigger it to himself. Fiji is in tears, warning and asking his fellow passengers to stay clear away from him because he is going to shoot himself and commit suicide: 'Get away, please, move away from me!' He warns. 'I going to shoot myself, because I have nothing left. A useless no one!... I am going to do it! So please stop coming!' Fiji is pulling himself away from the scared passengers who are trying to help him, moreover, the passengers are also trying to help themselves as the gun can pose a serious danger to others.

Makani arrived after a few minutes alongside with her colleagues, is just staring and watching the attempted suicide of Fiji with exclamation and disappointment, whereas with shockingly jealousy. With jealousy, Makani is feeling is because she watches the sympathetic passengers pleading to Fiji to stop before committing the dangerous action and yet he is getting all the attention. While Makani always had fantasized such a recognition for a long time especially in her prior minutes, she was at the bathroom and about to commit the evil deed without people trying to persuade her not to end her life. She was going to die alone without any love expressed towards her.

Makani is still standing in front of the nervous crowd. But she blatantly starts deserting,

walking away from the crowd while talking to Fiji, who is still crying as he holds the gun onto his head. She empathically says. 'Get already with it. Shoot yourself. No one is holding the gun for you.' Everyone hearing the statement was gripped with awe and shock. Fiji looks at the departing Makani with bewilderment. He also exclaims with awe and shock as he speaks at Makani who turns to vacantly stare at him as she seems like she doesn't care about the life-threatening situation. Fiji starts and laments to Makani, for he is looking at her now, one-on-one amongst the emotionally strung passengers. 'Lady, I have suffered enough. I have been without a job for years... my wife has left with my children. My family and my community have lost respect for me. They gossip about my life behind my back. They do not address me with dignity. They all look the other way – no one cares for a crying man! So this is it... Now I will end my life, for I am useless!'

However, the speech of Fiji doesn't convince Makani any better as she retorts, 'We all have problems mister, but we don't go around seeking attention like this. Why do you want to kill yourself like this in public? Fame? Sympathy? Please, mister, if you are going to do what you want to do, then do it now or somewhere else. Stop wasting our time.' The plane's attendants and the people try to stop Makani from enticing Fiji to commit suicide when they hush her down. Trying to make her quiet. But Makani is not submitting as she refuses to listen to any person and continues to confront Fiji.

Eye to eye, Makani and Fiji express their spiritual wounds. Fiji, however, removes the gun from his head but still carries it. 'Lady, my problems are worst. My love has deserted me with my children. What is a man without nothing to work for? My life has no meaning anymore.'

Makani responds, 'You are not the first to question life or who has lost a person who you thought was your soulmate. I know such pain... So please stop sulking!'

Fiji is now starting to be upset with Makani as she doesn't want to empathize with his struggles as his gun, unintentionally start pointing around Makani's direction. 'Lady, please try to listen. That what is wrong, people don't listen enough...' As Fiji speaks to Makani, he mistakenly pulls the trigger of the gun and, fortunately strikes the luggage away from the passengers, though the people scream as they fall down to the floor and move away from the carrier of the gun. Everyone moved back from Fiji, everyone except Makani, who is standing unafraid and unchallenged.

Makani looks at the regretting Fiji with determination and with reason. People are scared, and Makani steps forward. Fiji is confused as he warns Makani to stand away while he instinctively aims the gun at her. Makani still comes towards him. Fiji shouts. 'Get away, I don't want you getting hurt, Lady!' But Makani is coming. But Makani is in a trance-like state, in a somewhat possessed state of mind. However, she is staring at the gun itself – and not in Fiji. 'What?!' Makani yells. 'You want to kill me! Then do it. Kill me!' she taunts at the gun.

The gun is aimed at Makani as she is still shouting and drawing closer to the gun. 'Kill me! What are you waiting for?! I'm not scared! Take my life!' Makani stares at the gun as it becomes a symbol for Akila's infidelity, becomes a symbol of Anne's abandonment, a symbol of her sacrifice for nursing the lonely David alone. The gun has become a symbol of Fate in Makani's eyes! Makani continues expelling her emotions, the deep torture in her soul. 'Take my life! I can handle it! End it now!'

Fiji reverses back with a straight arm that has the gun in his hand until he is pinned against the wall as Makani approaches him. Fiji has no way to go, and the people in the plane are too terrified to even move. Makani comes to the proximity of fatality. The gun is at point-blank range; if the gun is triggered by any chance, Makani will not survive. Though Makani arrives



at Fiji. And she leans towards the gun that lays squeezed on her chest, at the part where her heart is located. Makani confronts Fate personally.

Suddenly, Fiji's straight arm, laden with the gun, crumbles from the stress of the situation; he collapses down on the floor, broken with regret and fear. Fiji empties his hurt with heartbreaking sobbing. As the gun dismisses from Fiji's hand, nearby passengers jump over and tackle Fiji down the floor, so he may not do anything dangerous again. Fiji is on the floor, immobilized by the people, and from the floor, with tears glossing his eyes, he stares upwards into Makani's burning eyes. Makani stares into Fiji's eyes without averting her own eyes. Makani sees the pain she has in her life in Fiji; Makani sees her own reflection from Fiji. Makani looks at the regretting Fiji and she is dispossessed from her rage.

Aware of her clear state of mind, Makani recognizes the audacious action she made and how she nearly ended her precious life. Realizing this good truth, Makani also too breaks down in sobbing as she collapses in the arms of helping people and she finally stops trying to act strong and start to let go of her past. Moreover, she has learned to accept her human fragility, the side that people are afraid to accept. Makani feels cathartic and weeps at the arms of helping people. Makani is starting to embrace the change brought by Fate. Makani is becoming whole. The plane flies perfectly afterwards.

Later, Makani stepped outside the plane at sunrise at the destination of Honolulu, her home. The sunlight glows on her beautiful face and she inhales and exhales. She then pulls out her engagement ring and throws it away.

Then a few minutes later, she is attended by the emergency services at the airport as the suicidal incident of Fiji on the plane is known by the officials as the paramedics, news broadcasters, and the police are upon arrival of the plane. While Makani is drinking coffee at the driveway to ease down and she sees Fiji being taken into custody by the police, she gets up from her chair and follows them. Makani stops the procession that was heading to the police vehicle, and she stands with Fiji who is filled with regret. She looks at him compassionately and says, 'Life, Fate has taught me about myself. Now I know that I am special. You are special too. Don't worry about anything else.' Makani finishes advising Fiji as a Wisewoman. And Fiji smiles thankfully at her. Makani afterwards relinquishes her cosy coat that kept her warm and clothes it on Fiji. Afterwards, Makani hugs Fiji, meaningfully. Though with handcuffed hands behind him, Fiji hugs Makani back meaningfully. They say their goodbyes and separate and go their ways. Makani, after a long time, feels free, without burden. Makani after a long time, genuinely smiles.

Chapter 7: The Wind is Now Free

This is the door to Makani's apartment. Remember, you are still the narrator of the story. Today, you will meet Makani again at the house you are standing in front of. In a few moments, you will understand. But first, observe outside. You must pay attention to the details so you can understand what is happening in Makani's life and the positive change she has made.

The apartment is a small, charming home. It is a house that is made for a youth who is trying to find their own independence and identity in a wild, unprocessed life. The house is a charming apartment, yet it now feels like a cherished abode since its windowsills have been recently painted and the sea's brackish air just flows. The houseplant on the doorstep is trimmed and cared for. At the front of the apartment are two windows you still see: one from the kitchen and the other belonging to the living room. And both are now open at eleven

o'clock in the morning. It seems that the apartment resident is a lively person at this time. But you, observing and standing at the doorstep of the apartment of Makani, are ready to understand the new change.

As you are about to open the front door, it opens itself to you. A handyman comes out, waving goodbye to the person inside. You are happy and you enter after the handyman was left. As you enter the apartment, you feel calm and welcomed. The house is beautifully sparkling, you think – the owner must be a good person. Forward you go, a few steps ahead, and you turn towards a doorway and observe the state of the kitchen. And marvelled you are. You see the kitchen window open, letting inside the beautiful glow of day. You see the kitchen sink is spotlessly clean, and the fresh air is breathtaking. Satisfied by the difference, when you turn your sight away from the kitchen, you notice a photograph of Makani celebrating her father's 71st birthday. They spent time visiting Anne's grave. You smile to yourself at the change, and you continue ahead.

You steadily walk into the house, and you turn your sight again to the living room, and the television is off, and the cell phone is off. You then look at the sofa, where it seems Makani usually sits, and you then peer and read an article called 'Strong and Independent' from a motivational magazine. The magazine is neatly placed on the table. Everything seems proper in the living room. You are content as you observe. And you pass with a smile.

The last door of Makani's bedroom. The room was not welcoming previously. What change can there be, if the other rooms are good? Now, you are left to confront it. You are in front of it, and you are about to open it. The door opens itself and widens. The door has been fixed. With Makani appearing with a beautiful smile, she looks at you.

However, after she opens the door, she walks towards you and passes you. For you are still an observing narrator, and she doesn't notice you. You smile back, and you watch her as she walks barefoot to a place where you have never seen her before. Makani opens up the door to the front yard and exits outside into the sunshine. You are about to follow her, but first you look at her bedroom to see the difference. Everything seems cheerful now – like the other rooms. And you also notice that on the bedroom wall is the motivational poster: 'Rain or shine, I will always be happy'. Makani has a new mindset – a good mindset. You move ahead towards the front door to see Makani.

As you come to the front yard, you are met by the gorgeous day. Under the cool shade of the evergreen tree, sitting on her vintage chair, Makhani is relaxing while reading a book about interior design and fashion business. That happy person you see over there who is embracing life one beautiful footstep at a time is called Makani: Makani, the true Wind.

Chukwuemeka Famous



Chukwuemeka Famous is a Nigerian writer whose short story ‘Oyinbo’ was shortlisted for the Pack Light Writing Contest. He has also been a finalist for the Quramo Writer’s Prize in 2020, was longlisted for the Bold Call Writing Contest in 2022, and was nominated for the 2022 Young Writers and Creatives Award. His debut novel, *We Will Live Again*, was published by Griots Lounge Publishing in 2023. More of his writing has been published in the anthology *Pack Light: Memories of Growing up in Africa*, *Ibua Journal*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *WSA Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Water Takes All of Me

Let me tell you one story about what water did to me. Kai, water, very wicked thing. Every time I think about it, I shake my head and wonder why God create it. Our priest used to tell us every Sunday that God is very loving and cannot think of destroying his people again. So why did God create this wicked thing called water? Water have no care for anything. See, if water want to come here now and stay, it will scatter everything that is blocking it. You cannot stop water. It is powerful. I still remember one time, in my former school, that rain fall one day and scattered the roof of our class. Everybody was screaming that the world is spoiling. Our teacher told us that day not to fear, that it is God that removed the roof of our class because he wants to see us very well. We believed it that time. But as I grow, I know that that teacher lied that time. It is not God that removed that roof anything. It is water. That is why I said water is powerful. It is so powerful that it removed my family from me. Now, see me today, I am alone. No Papa, no Mama, no Bibi, and no more play with little Kojo. Water have carried them to very faraway place. Me, I don't know where water have carried them to. I only watch them swim away. But they don't want to swim. They don't want to go away from their house. But everything is going away because water have come.

As this big water is pushing away my Papa, Mama, Bibi, and little Kojo, they keep shouting and crying that somebody should help them. But who can rescue them from the almighty water? Who can jump into that water that is big like ocean and doing like lion that is roaring, and drag my family and other people out of its big hands? Nobody at all. So, they continue shouting until the water close their mouths. It is as if the water tell them that if they like, they should shout too much, that it will not bring them back to their house.

As I watch them go away, I start to cry my own, and my whole body was shaking too much. I wish water carry me with them. I wish I did not agree to go and play with those boys that morning. If you ask me where the water carry them to, me, I don't know. But sometimes, it is doing me as if they are enjoying anywhere they are. Maybe the water carry them to Heaven, and they are eating azu ndu and nkwobi, and isi ewu and all those sweet sweet things that Papa tell us about, but Mama cannot cook because we have no money. But what if the water did not carry them to Heaven? What if that big water is coming from Hellfire and want to carry them to devil? When I think of this, my heart jump higher, and my cry start to increase. It is true that water have push them away. I cannot change that. But God please let it not push them away to Hellfire, because it is a place where people suffer too much. Papa used to tell us that if you go to Hellfire, devil will flog you very well on your bum bum and make fire to burn your body. So, every time, I tell God to not allow that water to carry my family to Hell. They have suffered too much on this planet earth. It will be bad if water carry them to where they will suffer plenty.



We are poor, but we used to be happy. Me and little Kojo used to carry containers we collect from dustbins and put small insects inside them. Then we will show Papa and tell him that we are capturing all the animals in the world. Papa will laugh and say that it is not possible, because where are we going to keep all the animals? My trouble sister, Bibi, like killing our insects. She say they used to make her body to scratch her. But me and little Kojo used to fight her, then she will cry and go and report to Mama.

In our former house at Orogwe, Mama used to sell big akara. If you see those akara eh, your stomach will rejoice very well like dog that see big bone. Many people in that area like coming to buy Mama's akara. They used to say that God gave her the talent to fry akara. Every morning, Mama will wrap plenty akara for us to take to school. That used to be both



our breakfast and lunch. Then when we come back from school, we will go to one small well that one big man dig for us, and fetch water to wash plates and our uniforms. After that, Kojo and I will quickly do our assignments and then run out of the house with our containers to gather more insects. Sometimes, some of our friends will follow us if they are free in their own house. We will catch grasshoppers, butterflies, plenty ants, cockroaches, earthworms, and one day, one of the boys caught a very big rat. That big rat made us know that we have power to catch other big animals. We even agreed to gather all our strength and catch a big lion if we see it any day. But do you know what happened to that rat? On our way home, the boy that held it from the legs did not hold it very well. So, the rat jumped out and while running away, mistakenly jumped inside one small pool of water on our street. I still remember how the rat was shaking inside the water, because it reminds me of how my family was shaking, too. That time, it was funny watching the rat shaking. All of us were laughing at it. One of the boys with us, Nnamdi, said the rat did not have sense, because how can it manage to escape from the people that catch it, and then it did not escape well? We laughed and laughed until we got home. Like that rat, my family did not escape water, because nobody can escape from water.



After my family die, I go to one small village they call Osu, and stay there alone. I did not know anybody living there. First, I live inside one small shed that the owner abandon. In the mornings, I will go and help people to farm, or harvest, or wash their cloths and run other errands. Then sometimes, they will give me money or food to eat. That is how I have been surviving. But it is not easy because sometimes, there is no farm to work and no other errand to do. So, on those days, I'll stay hungry and cry in my heart. My chest used to pain me from too much crying. Even my eyes, too. But man must survive. After all, Papa used to tell us that. But now, I think it is only water that man don't used to survive, because if not, my family will still be alive today.

Whenever there is no work to do or errand to run and I know that I will not eat that day, I will go to one small river where the village people used to do sacrifice for their community. I will sit near the water and ask it many questions. I do this even though water is my enemy. When Papa still used to do carpenter work, he quarreled with one of his colleagues one time. Then one day, Papa said enough is enough and go to meet the colleague to talk. After that day, they become friends again. It was that day that Papa tell us that it is good to talk to your enemy sometimes because it can make them repent and become your friend. That is why I used to come and talk to this water. I tell the water that I want us to reconcile. That I want to love it, but it must first bring back my parents and umunne m. But the water does not talk back to me. It will just stay like that, only showing me my shadow. It made me hate the water more. But I do not give up. I continue going to that stream, hoping that one day the water will talk back to me and vomit out my family. If that happens, kai, I will dance eh. I will dance more than this village people dance group.



Now, I am walking alone near this river. After a long time of talking to this river, I still cannot pronounce the name. River Onu-something. It's too long, biko. I only know River Niger, the one that our teacher, Master Bulala, tell us about in our school. Bulala is not his real name. I have forgotten his real name because my mind is very scattered now. We only name him Bulala because he like flogging stubborn students on their bum bum. Master Bulala can flog. Just like devil. In fact, sometimes, I don't know whether he can flog more than devil. Master Bulala and his cane is like umu ejima, twins. But we like Master Bulala because he used to tell us many things about the world. He is like prophet, because things he say will do to us have started doing. When water carry my family away, I remember that Master Bulala used to say that water will start to carry people away very soon. He will tell us that River Niger is increasing. He used to blame the nonsense

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government for not doing better things. Any time Master Bulala is complaining about the government doing nonsense things, we used to pray that God will make him the president so that he will start doing the good things that he talk about, for our country.any time rain is falling. If only sun shine that day, by now, Papa will be talking and drinking with our neighbour, Mr. Nnadi. Mama will be in the market to sell her vegetables. Bibi will stay in the house to wash plates. Me and little Kojo will be in the bush catching small insects and putting them inside our containers.

The water is clear and I can see my face inside it, shaking small small. Me and little Kojo used to go to one small stream near our settlement to catch fish and shake our face in the water. That stream used to be in one place, so we used to say that water is very calm. But that day that water carry them away, I learnt that water is not calm. Water is very stubborn. It don't use to hear word.

That day, we were cooking small fish that we catch inside Mama's pot when some boys, which are my friends, come and tell me to follow them to the bush to see our trap. I remember that little Kojo started crying small when I stand up to follow them. I tell him that I will come back fast fast and finish cooking the fish with him. But he start to cry higher because he did not want me to go, and I start hearing Mama shouting from inside the house that why am I making my brother to cry. But I did not reply. I just run with those boys to the forest to see their trap. Chai, I wish I did not go. I wish I tell those my friends to go and leave me, that I want to stay with my little Kojo and cook the fish with him. Water would have carry me with them. I used to cry too much when I remember how Kojo was crying because I leave him. The pain used to hit my heart like when Bibi is pounding pepper and crayfish in Mama's mortar; gbim, gbim.



As I turn to leave the river and go home, I saw some small children playing with something. I go to join them and see what they are playing with. It is a big orange and four of them are kicking it around like ball. I join them and kick the orange but the hunger in my stomach is beating me too much. But I want to play, so I continue. The place we stayed to play the ball is in one small clear place close to the bush that surround the river. As we play, I still use one eye to look at the river, because I am expecting it to vomit my family. I really want to see them again.

One of the boys named Kanu kicked the orange very far inside the bush. Another boy shouted ooom and say that Kanu supposed to be playing small small. Then Kanu tell him that he should not worry because he can go inside the bush to bring it. I decided to follow Kanu so that it will not be as if I am not contributing. Me and Kanu enter the thick bush and I fear that snake will bite me. We used our hands to remove the leaves and branches that block road. One of the branches that have thorns chook my hand and small blood come out. But it did not pain me. Kanu was walking in front of me as if he know the exact place where the orange land. Even, how can we see the orange when there were many things on the ground like dry branches, too much green leaves that will not allow us recognise the green orange, ants walking like how we used to walk when we are marching from the assembly ground to our class. We even see shit. Very big one and very brown and fresh and I wonder who shit it now now. Maybe it is one of the boys. I get tired and tell Kanu to come so that we will go out. But Kanu want to find that orange. Even when I begged him that we should just pick another orange and go home, Kanu shake his head mba. Then small time, Kanu tell me to not make noise. He was looking at the white chicken feathers on the ground. Then we hear small voices coming from one direction.

"They are doing sacrifice here," Kanu said.



“Who?”

“The village Dibia,” Kanu reply and walk small small towards the place the noise is coming from. The place is... ermm...kai, there is one word Master Bulala teach us o...yes, sloped. It means that where we are standing is higher like mountain and where those two people are standing is lower like valley. We see two of them, one is an old man wearing white cloth while the other is a small boy wearing red cloth. They are standing beside the river. The small boy is holding a fowl in his hand. The fowl have died. It’s like they killed it in that place we saw the feathers because we also saw small blood there that have mixed with sand. The old man is saying something to the water which we cannot hear very well.

“That is Ichaka,” Kanu said to me. He bend down on the ground and ask me to bend too, so that we can watch them.

“What are they doing with that fowl?” I ask as the old man take the fowl from the small boy and move inside the water. I was afraid for him because I thought the water will carry him like it carry my family. But it did not carry him. That means, this Ichaka is very powerful o.

“Ichaka is very powerful o,” Kanu said as if he heard what I thought and wanted to agree with me. Ichaka reach one part where the water is touching his knee and stop. He turn the fowl dead body in circle plenty times as he is still saying what he was saying. He then throw the fowl inside the water and shout very loudly. The small boy start to dance and clap his hands as Ichaka come out of the water. They start to climb up towards us. Me and Kanu was afraid and crawl away quietly. Then we stand to our feet and run away, leaving the orange we came to find.

After that day, I keep thinking about Ichaka and how the water did not carry him. By this time, I am now living with one old Mama that hire me as her houseboy. I used to eat only once in a day but it is better like that. That day I see Ichaka, I did not eat anything before I go out. But when I go back home, the hunger disappear because of too much thinking in my head about Ichaka. Even when the old Mama call me to come and eat food, I say no, thank you, that I am not hungry. The old Mama tell me that if I don’t eat now, that I will not eat again for that day. I say no problem and enter my small room. That time, it is not food that was my problem. It is how to meet that powerful Ichaka that is stronger than water and tell him my story. Maybe he will help me talk to the water like he did that day. He will tell the water to bring back my parents. With what I see with my two eyes that day, I know that man will have more power than water. When I ask Kanu to take me to his house, Kanu ask me why. I tell Kanu my story and Kanu cry very well. He then tell me that Ichaka will help me but I have to look for fowl for him. Fowl? That is not a problem at all o, I tell him. The old Mama I am now living with has plenty fowls at the back of her house which she used to sell at the village market. I will just go there and steal one. She will not notice it because she is old. Her eyes are closing small small.

The next night after Kanu tell me about the fowl, I leave my room and sneak to the fowl shed at the back of the house. All of them are sleeping. But when I open the cage small small so that the old woman will not wake up and start shouting thief, the fowls stand up and make noise. I feel like slapping them. Why did they not continue sleeping? Stupid fowls. Anyway, if they like, let them make big noise, I must take one of them. If the old woman like, let her wake her up and come outside to chase me, I will just carry the fowl and run very fast. You think I cannot run? I can run o. When Papa tell me to go and buy something, I will just run and come back sharp sharp. Then Papa will call me aeroplane. I target one fowl, the one that is close to the door of the cage, and grab it. It shout too much. The other fowls start to shout, too. My heart start beating out of fear. I leave the cage open and run out with the fowl.

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Kanu was waiting for me at the small primary school in the village. As he see me running, he come out of one of the classroom and walk towards me. He collect the fowl from me and tell me he will hide it somewhere. Then we planned to go to Ichaka's house the next night. I run back to the house and I see the old woman walking out from the backyard. She is holding one long stick which help her to walk because her left leg is not good.

"Where did you go?" she asked me.

"I go to chase the thief, Mama," I reply. The night is blowing too much breeze but I am sweating small. The old Mama did not talk again. She just walk into her room and close her door. I sit at the door of my own room, and stare into the sky. The moon is shining small because some white clouds is blocking it. I am happy that time as I watch the sky, because I know that my family will soon come back and if this sky that I am looking at cry again, the water will not swallow them. This time, I will fight the water very well. In fact, it's like I will tell Ichaka to give me small power so that I can fight water and then fight the government that cannot do better things to stop water from killing people. Master Bulala say government is only doing things they are not supposed to do. Like scattering people's houses. And it is true, because I remember where we used to live before. It was a small house that they use cement to build. Papa did not have money to build big house for us. Remember I said he was a carpenter. In Nigeria, carpenters don't used to have money. Only wood and plenty nails.

Then one day, after government scatter his shop and other people's shop, he stopped doing carpenter work. They did not only scatter his shop, but they also scatter our house and other people house. They say we cannot live there because they want to plant trees to control the climate. But they did not later plant trees. Instead, they build nonsense road that will still spoil. Master Bulala complain very well about that thing government do to us. He said government have displaced many people.

That day that I follow my friends to go and check trap in the bush, we were talking about how wicked government is, and how good it will be for Master Bulala to do election and become our president because we know he will do good things for us. As we were still talking, it start to rain. First, it was small and we think it will be like that. After we check the trap and there is nothing in it, we say let us pluck small mango before going home. But the rain increased and the bush is far from our zinc houses. We stay under one tree and wait for it to stop. But it don't want to stop. It is becoming heavier and heavier. Thunder is blowing and lightning is striking and heavy wind is blowing, and we are shivering. One of the boys start to shout at the rain to stop, but the rain does not listen.

As we were under that tree, shivering, one of the boys start to cry because he thinks the thunder will blow him away. One big tree fall down near us and we scream. We have not seen that kind of rain before. It fall as if it want to destroy the earth. It is like the rain that Master Bulala tell us about in the Bible that scatter the whole world but only one man named Noah and his wife and children and some animals survive. As we stand there screaming, I also pray that the rain should not destroy the world.

When it look like it will not stop, we say let us be going home like that because night is coming and the bush is dangerous. We throw away all the mangoes we pluck because we cannot be walking inside the rain carrying mangoes. The whole street is full of water. We walk inside it even while the rain is still falling. The water is almost reaching our stomach, and our legs is touching the ground that is filled with poto poto.

Many cars have stop in the water. One stick electric pole have fallen on top of one house and



the people inside are screaming that light will shock them. I laugh small because I feel that they are foolish. How can light shock them when government don't used to bring light?

When we reach our area, we are not seeing the zinc houses. They have scattered inside the water. Many clothes, pots, stoves, books, chairs, and other things I cannot remember again are floating inside the water. One of my friends shouted ewoo because the water have scattered everything. All we can see that time is water that have covered the face of the earth as Master Bulala used to say any time he tell us about that rain that destroy the world in the Bible.

Some of the zinc they use in building the house are floating while some are below. It cut my leg. Then I see them, and others shouting. I shout to them but they cannot hear me. Little Kojo is struggling in the water and it look like he is even dancing.

Papa, Mama, and Bibi, all of them are struggling and shouting and crying that someone should save them. Me, I cannot swim. I can only shout to them but they keep following the water until I cannot see them again. There is one very big ditch where government used to dig sand from. It is close to our area. The water carried everything, including my family, and flow inside that ditch.

Finally, the day I was to see Ichaka reach. That evening, after the old woman have eaten her dinner which I cook, I sneak out of the house and run to the primary school to meet Kanu. Before that time, I sat in my room and think about how I will scream once my family come out of that water. I thought about Kojo, and how we will carry containers and start picking animals again, because we must pick all the animals in the whole world.

That night, breeze was too much. And even though I ran well, I did not sweat, only my heart was beating fast. When I got to the primary school, I saw Kanu sitting down in front of one of the classrooms. He rush to me when he see me and tell me to be fast because his father will soon start looking for him. We walk away from the school to where Kanu tied the fowl to one plantain tree. Kanu loose the fowl and it make small noise. That stupid fowl, noise maker. It did not know that the whole village was asleep. We start walking to Ichaka's house.

"But Tochi, what if you don't see your family this night?" Kanu ask me.

"I will surely see them, Kanu. Ichaka will bring them out of the water," I replied.

"If water carry something, that thing don't used to come back again o," Kanu say, looking at me somehow. I did not like that look. It do me as if Kanu want to tell me that my family will never come back, that Ichaka is powerful, yes, but he don't have power to bring my family back, that true true, water is powerful and even stronger than the Ichaka. Chai, I did not like how I feel that time. Small part of me believed that Ichaka will bring them out. Another part believed that Kanu was telling the truth; I will not see them and I will continue to be alone.

"Water also carry my brother one time like that," Kanu say and I stopped walking to look at him.

"Water carry your brother?" I ask, because the thing surprise me o. Kanu don't used to do like who water carry his brother.

"Yes," Kanu reply. "In my house, we are only two. Me and that my younger brother. I liked him very much eh. I used to fight anybody that look for his trouble. Then one day, we went to the market to buy foodstuffs because my mother was sick. At the market, rain started to fall. We ran under one small shed and waited and watched. Before you know it, the rain was now heavy. Very heavy, with wind blowing angrily as if something annoyed it in Heaven. Before you know it, the wind started throwing away many things that they market women were selling. One, her bucket where she

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used to keep her money flew away, scattering the money away in the rain. The woman was shouting that her money cannot just go like that. So, she enter the rain to pick them. Then as she was running, she slip and fall down. By this time, water have full everywhere. The rain was very heavy. Then my brother run inside the rain to go and help her stand up. That my brother is very kind. That is why I love him very much. Not only me, even our parents, our teachers, our neighbours, everybody just love him. As he ran to help her, I shouted that he should come back, because by this time, water was now washing away everything, the tables, the stools that the market women sit on, vegetables, peppers, meat, everything. I was afraid that the water will carry him, too. But he kept running towards the woman because she could not stand up. The water was surrounding her with anger. Then I saw my brother fall down also, the water was reaching his stomach, then his shoulders, then his neck, and then it covered him. I shouted and ran to pull him out. But I could not. I could not even see him. Many people's bodies were already swimming inside the water. I managed and ran back home under the rain, crying and shouting that water has carried my sweet little brother. Even at home, water full everywhere. My parents were standing outside in the rain because the water had covered everything inside our house. When I tell them about my brother, my father screamed and ran out towards the market. My mother fall on the ground, inside the water o, and started saying that her son will never die. But me, I knew that my brother has gone. I saw how that water swallowed him. And it pains me that I could not help him. I really wish I stopped him from going to help that woman. When the rain stopped, my father came back carrying his dead body in his hand. My brother was swollen and when they press him, water poured out from his mouth and nose. So, that is how water carry my brother. I started to wish from that day that he will come back. But he did not. Dead people don't used to come back." Kanu finished talking.

I did not say anything. I was feeling pity for him. But I was somehow angry because Kanu is not giving me hope. So, I keep quiet until we reach Ichaka's house. His house is small. It look like it have only one room. Kanu knocked on the front door. Nobody answered. He knocked again and one small boy open the door immediately. I remember him. It is the same small boy that follow Ichaka in that stream that time I saw him first.

"We want to see Ichaka," Kanu tell the small boy.

"He is at the backyard. Go there and see him," the small boy said as if he is commanding us. I felt like knocking his head for talking to us like that. Did he know how many years I used to senior him?

We walk to the backyard and we saw Ichaka sitting under one shed, in front of some red things. We see one thing that has a human being face. When Ichaka see us, he shout that we should remove our slippers before entering before his gods. We obeyed and sat before him. Then he ask us to wait, let him finish doing what he was doing. Ichaka is thin and I wonder how he will bring my parents back from that water. But I just believe that he is powerful. When he finish what he was doing, he turned and ask us what the problem is.

I opened my mouth and tell him my story of how I lost my family. Then I tell him that I saw him talking to the water and entering inside it one time and the water did not carry him. That it made me know he is powerful. "Please, Ichaka, I want you to go back to that water and tell it to bring back my family." I kneel down and plead for him. Ichaka laughed very well, his Adam's apple shaking as if it want to burst out of his throat. It annoy me that he was laughing. But I keep quiet.

"You want me to bring back the dead for you?" Ichaka ask, looking at me. His voice is not big. I thought he will have very big voice like Papa. "It is not possible. I cannot tell the water to bring them back. Even if I can, it is not this water that swallow them. Is it?"

I shake my head.

“So, no need. Just go home and sleep. And keep thinking about them, inugo?”

I start to cry now. It is now real that I cannot see my family again. I stand up from there and run away, crying all the way.

Jan Brümmer



Jan Conrad Schoonbee Brümmer comprises a quarter Conradie, a quarter Schoonbee, a quarter Brümmer, and one quarter his own man – this he regards as his intellectual composition. Physically, he is a 19-year-old who leans more towards the Schoonbee side. According to Hemingway, ‘writing, at its best, is a lonely life... [the good writer] must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day.’ Ostensibly, then, Jan would make a good writer. He developed a late interest in writing at school, but remains sceptical of ever making it into a career. He is currently studying towards an engineering degree at Stellenbosch University.

RIP Revisited

The man wakes up in his hospital bed, slightly confused. He is unaware that for several months, the bed which he occupies has been his; it has since moulded to suit the creases of his skin. The madame finds him posed as in David's *Death of Socrates*, finger raised, reaching for an invisible poison.

However, he does not have the same resolve that Socrates had. Instead, his expression is discomposed and the madame thinks he looks rather silly.

She hands him a mirror after he asks, and the man finds that no one did him the courtesy of shaving his beard. It is, by now, long and grey.

A few hours later he bids the madame farewell.

He thinks of taking a bus, but opts for a scenic stroll, one that would remind him of his childhood. Instead of nostalgia, nausea gives him a gut punch. Muttering to himself that it would have been better to take the bus, he mistakenly assumes that nostalgia had handed him the blow. Yet, as he wanders ever further along the busy street, he grows ever queasier. Later he has to cover his nose with a handkerchief, which helps a bit. Then, as there exists a slight parting in the throng of people, he glimpses the source of his troubles. It lies there on a table, feeble and defunct. A lettuce leaf – and here, the narrator must attest that he does not mean this metaphorically.

The man cries a little, not understanding why. Ashamed, he bounds on home.

There, he longs for sleep. His body politely declines; it tells him that he has already been asleep for far too long. Instead, it subverts his longing, urging one hand to his fair, round belly. He needs food, but any given possibility of what to eat reminds him of the smell in the street.

In his yard, there is an apple tree – there is a washing line with pegs on it, too. Peg on nose, he carefully approaches the stately old tree. The apples, which he so dreads and desires, are contorted, and marred by birds. They are ugly apples, but at least the man does not remember their taste.

Elevating his burly frame (on tiptoes), he plucks one.

'Ow,' says the tree. 'Squirrel' – to one of his henchmen – 'go pick a few strands out of that man's beard so that he might feel a similar sensation.'

The old man, understandably aghast, falls flat on his back. Then, responding from where he lies, he begs, in a whisper-like voice: 'Please, honourable sir, though I at first disliked my grey beard, I now enjoy its voluminous warmth.' After a pause, seeing that the squirrel did not move from his perch on a lower branch, he continued. 'I do not intend to bereave you your' – considering his words – 'apples'.

'I merely wish to satisfy my stomach – there, see how it rumbles.' His stomach did rumble.

'Why do you have a peg on your nose?' thunders the tree.

The man, seeing a malicious glare in the squirrel's beady eyes, decides against telling the lie he is currently formulating. He tells the tree about the smell and the lettuce, and the tree, in



turn, listens tactfully. The man concludes and, clearly, after giving the matter some thought, the tree replies, but now in an altogether different tone to the one earlier adopted. It is soft and compassionate, even able to ease the man into a sitting position:

‘But my dear fellow’, says the tree, ‘you have merely experienced what my kinsmen and I have experienced since God created this world. I am lucky since I am not prone – as grass is – to being trampled upon. Nor have I been much disturbed by you. The most I have had to endure is the birds –damnable creatures – they pick at me, excrete my digested self upon me, and even have the audacity to try to make a house out of me. Yet I am grateful. I have made friends of the squirrels, and I am not grass, or lettuce, or like some other poor soul beneath me. I just wish that we had a God vying for us as yours does for you.’

He ends this address with a sigh; a groaning of wood as heard by the man.

‘But what am I to do?’ laments the man. ‘I don’t want to eat something that screams as I chew.’

‘I am afraid that you will have to, my friend, though I do have a suggestion, one that might ease your conscience. You will naturally have to eat a lot of meat, but to prevent scurvy, eating plants is unavoidable. I admit it is regrettable, though I can point you in the direction of some particularly mischievous ones: you’d be doing the garden a service by eating them.’

The man is all too happy to concede to this suggestion and, upon being prompted to do so, trots to the other end of the garden.

There, he finds the tomato plant. It is hollering all sorts of nonsense at a neighbouring lemon tree.

‘Oh, do shut up,’ he overhears the lemon tree, saying to the tomato plant in an exasperated tone. Then, as the rabid tomato plant does not listen, he hears the lemon tree again: ‘Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up...’

‘This is chaos,’ thinks the man. After a few moments of consideration – prolonged by the consistent exchange occurring before him – he steps forward and yanks at both plants’ stems. He pulls so hard that both are now aloft, though still firmly in his grip. While the tomato continues hollering, the lemon tree now shrieks terribly. The man’s stomach controls him, and he starts eating the tomato plant whole (quite unlike any normal person). This is too much for the young lemon tree to bear; he faints for a moment, but almost immediately regains consciousness.

‘Please eat me too,’ asks the lemon tree softly.

‘Bitter,’ replies the man, like some daft Neanderthal. He is crouched over the mangled tomato plant, hands still busy, his beard full of sap and seeds and the like...

The peg lies next to him in the grass. He seems not to have realised its absence. The garden despairs. Its mood, however tangible, does not even motivate the man to lift his head. The lemon tree is left to die out in the sun. Rootless, his leaves slowly discolour, and his stem gradually twists out of shape.

A hadeda, pitying the dying tree, carries him away to a peaceful stream, where the natural order has not yet been disturbed. He is left there, and he is happy to die between unspeaking trees.

Junias Tinashe



Junias Tinashe or T.J. Chipenyu is a Zimbabwean fiction writer. His work has appeared in several African magazines. He is based in the former Sunshine City, Harare. He's pretty loquacious with the pen and is enamoured with African stories. He is in the process of writing a novel set in Harare.

The Empty Toolbox

I look again in the toolbox, and my head is reeling. I can't believe what I am seeing — nothing. It's all gone. There's nothing in the pillow and in the small bag that I had put in another bag inside my massive travelling bag either. The pillow has been carefully sewn back. I start pacing the room like a Pentecostal at a public prayer meeting about binding devils. I can't make sense of it all. As far as I am seeing, there has been no break in. Everything is intact. There is no sign of forced entry both on the door and the windows, at least according to my untrained eye. I am not thinking straight at all, but I am certain there are only two possibilities. This is either the work of an expert — the kind we see in movies — or I think with a shudder, someone close. The problem is it doesn't add up, the only people who know my room in and out are my girlfriend, my three friends — one of whom is out of town — and this other girl who comes on the weekends that my girlfriend is not around. None of them would steal my money; I trust them with my life. Besides, the girl who comes on weekends doesn't know where I keep it. She just does her business and hits the road, so she is ruled out completely. So who could it be? The landlord's kids? Hard to believe, but I have heard less believable stories coming out as true. The problem is that they are too young to do it so expertly. The oldest, though outrageously naughty, is only twelve. So there is no way he could engineer such a clean break-in, however precocious. And even less believable would be his capacity to find the three different places I had hidden my money.

So I have to stick to the expert theory, because it's the only one that makes a modicum of sense. The other two are ludicrous, to say the least. Or are they? No, I can't believe this thought has just crossed my mind. Am I beginning to doubt the integrity of my friends? The same people who have been by my side through thick and thin? Like, these people have moved mountains for me, so I don't know why that thought really passed through my mind. Or it's that phenomenon – How does that saying go again? “You cannot stop birds from flying over you but you can stop them from making a nest in your head.” So yeah, we really can't stop thoughts, however ridiculous, from entering our minds, what we should not do is allow them to take root. I'm at my wits' end. The lobola negotiations are only three weeks away, and that's where more than half of the money was supposed to go. The other part was supposed to cover my exam fees for an online course that I'm undertaking and the rest was supposed to cater for mum's hospital bill. So, you can imagine how terrible I'm feeling right now. My stuff was going on fine, until now. Who to call first is the million-dollar question. My girlfriend? — She's the natural first choice. But where do I start?

“Babe, cancel all your plans. Tell your aunts and your uncles it's not going to happen, the lobola money was stolen.” She will freak out. Or even collapse, you know how women value these things. And to be honest, I would understand her, it's her big moment. She has already bought the outfits, I think, and her Twitter and Facebook are full of hints. It will kill her to hear that all that was in vain. So nope, I will pass.

My mother – She understands what it means to lose everything. Our house was gutted by fire when I was nine and my sister was two. Luckily we were not inside but we lost pretty much everything else. This will not move her much, but I feel she would bear it more readily if it happened to her than to her dear son. Also, she's diabetic and has been prone to collapsing lately, so this might put a strain on her. I will tell her, but not now.

My friends – Who do I call first? Kudzai, Takura or Shepherd?

Kudzai is a Lawyer. He's logical about every situation and looks at everything through that lens. I like logic, but not now. I will tell him later.



Shepherd is the group comedian. He makes everything look like a joke, but he is also very empathetic. He likes to listen. Problem is you never know which side of him will pop up first. So I will have to tell him later.

Takura is emotional. He easily cries, just as easily as he laughs. He might cry on the phone if I tell him now, and I'm not yet ready for that. So I settle for Tariro, the girl who visits on the weekends when my girlfriend is not around. Sweet girl with a quiet confidence. Doesn't demand much too. What I like most about her is her perspicacity. She sees things that people often overlook. Lying to her is futile, I have discovered. You can always tell by her heavily dimpled, sardonic smile that she is not convinced. I pick up my phone, press her number and dial. It rings, but no one picks. I call three times and every time the phone rings but is not picked. It's irritating. I almost call Shepherd three times but each time, stop a click short. Tariro returns the call about fifteen minutes later.

"Hey, Bheki. Is everything okay? Sorry, I was in church." Her tone is frantic. I can't help but suspect she wasn't in church but with a boy. I can feel a tinge of jealousy washing through me. People get possessive in times of need. Possessive even with things that are not their own.

"Hello Tari, nothing is okay. Someone stole my money. All of my life's savings. Can you imagine?" My situation assumes a new gravity as I tell her, "I don't know what to do right now. It's all I had."

"What?... I'm so sorry... like how... how much was stolen? Was there a break-in...? Are you home like now...? Can I come?" she says, her voice shaking. She's bombarding me with questions, but I like it.

"Six thousand United States dollars. Part of it was in the toolbox, the other I had sewn it in my pillow and the other was in my travelling bag. There are no signs of a break-in at all. It's the work of an expert..."

"Or someone close to you who you trust," she says.

"Are you implying that one of my friends could be involved? If so, you are obviously wrong."

"No, not at all," she says calmly "All I'm saying is keep your options open, Bheki. But goodness gracious me, six thousand US dollars in this economy? That person really did you dirty Bheki, I'm sorry."

"Thanks sha. It's painful. I'm at my wits' end. I don't know what to do."

"Oh, I know I'm sorry," she says warmly, "I think you should go to the police straight away. And Bheki, please trust me, don't alert anyone, even the people you trust. Do it discreetly."

What is she driving at? Is she trying to blame one of my friends? Is she saying they could be involved in this?

"Okay Tari. Thanks so much. I appreciate. I will try to heed your advice," I say, knowing fully well I will not.

"Take care, Bheki, and I'm so sorry."

"Thanks Tari. Have a nice day."

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She terminates the call.

The call has lightened the burden slightly. Special girl Tariro is, but I am still not exactly thrilled about the fact that she tried to insinuate that my friends could be involved in this heinous crime. They are above such things. It looks like I haven't fully accepted what has happened because right now, I don't feel too devastated. Maybe I'm still numb, or Tariro's call has done wonders. I suspect the former. Then my girlfriend calls. Now things have just got real. I wanted her to be the last person I will tell. I wanted to prepare the words well in advance, arrange them in such a way that they would make the situation slightly more palatable. Now all has been thrown into disarray. I leave the phone ringing. I can't answer it yet. I don't have the guts to confront her with the truth. She usually doesn't call twice, if you don't answer the first time, she's done but you will pay for it. You will call ten times without a response, and then you get a mouthful, a ferociously scathing one. But today she calls again. I let it ring out again. But she's relentless; she keeps calling with the patient persistence of a side chick. I finally succumb and answer. I'm ready for a venomous backlash, but I'm in for a shocker. She's in a jovial mood.

"Babe, can you believe the day I had? I found a very affordable tailor for my Aunts' outfits," she stops to catch her breath. I'm just standing there like a zombie hoping her phone might just catch fire or something, because my heart is really not made to break such terrible news to people I care about. I can't even pretend to be happy for her because once I drop this grenade, if I finally find the intestinal fortitude to, all this childlike enthusiasm will be ripped away so violently, that little delicate heart will break into so many pieces it will be almost impossible to piece it back together again. My eyes are full of tears, and my throat is constricting. I know if I reply she will sense the sadness in my voice and ask but if I don't she will wonder what's happening and will be prompted to ask. So I'm firmly betwixt the Devil and the deep blue sea.

"Babe, are you okay. You are too quiet?" The bombshell comes much earlier than I expected.

I try to firm myself. "Babes, it's not a big deal. I just got a slight headache, that's all. How was your visit?"

"Oh sorry babe, drink some ibuprofen hey?" she says. I'm heartbroken. She's so happy and cheerful. You can tell from her voice that all that is on her mind is the lobola ceremony. She doesn't even know the enervating blow that's lying in wait for her. My tears are flowing freely now.

"And Bheki, how far are you with organizing transport? I know a guy."

Goodness gracious me! I'm in trouble. Big trouble. Should I tell her or string her along and pretend everything is fine? But where will that get me though? I will still have to tell her sooner or later.

"Sekai, babes," I say somberly, my voice choking with pain.

"What honey, are you okay?" she asks, the concern in her voice palpable. My heart literally breaks. I'm sobbing now.

"Bheki!"

"Sekai, someone stole my money, our money, the lobola money. It's gone, babes."

"Oh babe, what?... Like... what happened? Someone broke in?"



“No babes,” I’m trying hard to contain myself. “Everything is intact; it’s the work of an expert.”

I expect her to either collapse right there or break into a heartrending cry, but she doesn’t. She replies in a much cooler tone than I expected. But I’m not sold. She is just trying to be strong, but she’s dying inside. I know how much she wants this. She’s been talking about this lobola thing for a while now – more than a year, I think. She has been enthusiastically telling all her friends, and a couple of them are supposed to grace the occasion. The time and effort she has spent on the preparations, and she’s this calm? No, I don’t think so. She’s doing this for me. She’s being strong for me.

“This is bad,” she says. “Have you reported it to the police yet?”

“Not yet, but I will be going to the police station soon,” I say.

“Bheki,” she says in almost a whisper.

“Babes,” I reply.

“Don’t you think it might be someone you trust? I mean... you never know.”

There it is again. My friends are being dragged into this again. I brush the thought aside but I’m beginning to ask some questions too. It breaks my heart because I can’t fully shake the feeling away. The seeds of doubt that Tariro sowed have taken root now. Maybe, just maybe... but no!

“But Babes... do you think...”

“Nobody’s perfect Bheki. I’m not saying one of your friends did it, but it’s always good to be vigilant and not be blinded by loyalty. People are deceptive.”

Quite scathing, don’t you think? I’m finding it hard to believe that any of my friends could do this to me. We have been through a lot together. We are brothers. But my girlfriend is not the first to suggest that I be vigilant regarding my friends, Tariro insinuated it too. What do they say about female intuition?

“Okay babes, I will be watchful,” I say in a subdued voice.

The door opens, it’s Kudzai. He’s shouting about something, as usual, being the loquacious fellow that he is.

“Babes, I got to go, check you later.”

“Take care Bheki. This is so bad sha. Don’t forget what I told you, hey.”

“I will not forget. Cheers, babes.”

Kudzai wants me to go with him to one of his colleague’s graduation party. He has always been the life of the party. His jaw drops when I tell him what happened. He’s deflated now and drops on the couch as if in slow motion, like some unfortunate Boxer on the wrong end of a debilitating knockout blow. He loosens his tie and stares at the ceiling with a rather vacant expression. I steal a glance in the wardrobe mirror and realize that my eyes are swollen. Did I cry that hard on the phone with my girlfriend?

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Embarrassing. A grown man crying pitifully like a kindergarten kid who misplaced his shoe on his first day at school – well, I actually did this. The composure that my girlfriend showed makes my weakness all the more glaring. Kudzai suggests that I go to report the matter to the Police straightaway. He also finds it hard to believe the expert thief theory. He’s convinced it’s someone who knows the house in and out. Someone who knows exactly where the money is kept and has access to the house. But who it is now, that is the question.

Kudzai starts his legendary theories. He’s pacing the room, his tie in hand. I sit on the couch listening. The way he is speaking is mildly soothing, something I can’t take for granted.

First suspect: The man himself — you, Bheki.

Your girlfriend has been pestering you about lobola and you have been saving despite the economy doing everything it can to throw a spanner in the works. This has taken a toll on you. Also, the relationship has become kind of mundane, and to be honest, you want out, and suddenly, you realize you don’t want to marry soon anymore; the world just got more interesting. You have a girl you are beginning to like too so marriage will hinder you. So you stage a break in. Two birds, one stone. Now you have the money, but the lobola ceremony is postponed indefinitely. Everyone understands. Your girl probably leaves you after this — something you were actually hoping it happens. So, you are now free to unleash your real self to the world. You get into a relationship with the other girl, and you live happily ever after.

Second suspect: Me

I drive a decent enough Toyota Corolla, but I saw that new BMW that my boss drives. The girl I was gallivanting with left me for my boss because who doesn’t want to be seen in a Beemer? I also want a BMW, but my budget is tight. I can’t take a loan because I’m still paying for the one I took for the renovation of my mum’s house. So I’m at my wits’ end. Then suddenly a thought comes to my mind, like a revelation, “Bheki has lobola money.” I make the Thierry Henry knee slide because now my problem is sorted. I steal your key and make a duplicate. I come to your house while you are at work and everything is history.

Third suspect: Takura.

Well, our boy is a money changer and dealer. He probably got into a very bad deal and got the short end of the stick. He’s probably in the red now, and rent is due. Also, the guys he went into business with are bad hombres. He got to pay them up or they mess him up. He tries to get loans from his colleagues in business but business has been low, they don’t have enough money themselves. He thinks of asking you for a loan, but he realizes lobola is nigh. So he thinks about it and finally realizes he only has one option — do his friend in. So, you know the drill.

Fourth suspect: Tariro.

You are drunk in love, and she has just shown you what true love is in a new way. She’s not girlfriend material but you like her for other things which she do so well. So you know how women are at pillow talk. She listens while you ramble about everything from your childhood dreams to your most embarrassing moments and you get carried away so you tell her where you keep your money. She laughs and says, “Are you Indian? Why do you keep your money in a flippin’ toolbox and pillow?” and you smile and say, “Namaste”. Now she knows where your money is and probably even where your toolbox key is because you guard was at its



lowest and you revealed everything. She likes you but not enough to just let six thousand USD go so she comes one day while you are at work. She's already duplicated the keys. She comes out six grand richer. Her car is on the way.

Fifth suspect: Shepherd.

He has not been here for close to a week, but he has always wanted some extra money. So he waits for the time he's working out of town to carry out his plan. He wants to create an alibi. So he has a friend and they have gone through the plan together, so the friend comes while you are at work and comes out six bags richer but Shepherd can't get through to him now because the goon tricked him. Now, the goon has taken the money and vanishes into thin air.

Sixth suspect: Your girlfriend.

She always hated you. She thinks you are ugly and broke but you make her laugh sometimes when her real boyfriend is ignoring her so she keeps you close. She's utterly horrified by the thought of being married to you and, at some level, feels sorry for you because she never truly loved you. So she comes and takes all your money to put you out of your misery. What a thoughtful woman.

We are both laughing now. It's funny what a chat with a good friend can do to your mood, and these are the people the ladies want me to suspect of being involved in the theft. I'm sorry, but female intuition loses this time around. I'm still under no illusions regarding the magnitude of my predicament, but the conversations I've had are making it more bearable. Kudzai's theories are spectacularly hilarious. The guy is just brilliant in a twisted way. I finally decide to go and report the matter to the Police. I'm greeted with the shock of my life when I reach the Police Station because my girlfriend is there. I thought she was still out of town? I'm relieved to see her though and she doesn't look too devastated, except for the mildly swollen eyes. She's not too shocked to see me because she smiles almost distractedly as I enter the building. She's casually sitting on a rocking chair talking with the Assistant Inspector — a rather austere man that I find out I don't particularly like at first sight. We exchange greetings and I file my report. He's also certain that it's someone close to me and wants to bring them all for questioning, including my girlfriend. I'm quite stunned, but he's adamant that it's the correct procedure. Kudzai and Takura are summoned for interrogation. My girlfriend will be interrogated too. My heart sinks because I have heard harrowing stories about interrogation methods in these ends. I can't bear to think of what my friends, and especially my girl, are about to go through. Maybe I shouldn't have reported it, but then again, they are the ones that had encouraged me to do so. Still, I can't help but feel partly responsible for whatever is going to happen to them. I'm excused, and I go back home, shaking with anxiety.

Kudzai is released a few hours later. He says the man was determined to charge him and harass him. Him being a lawyer is what saved him from what looked like a certain night in the cold cells and probably from the wrath of the infamous truncheon on the soles of his feet. My girlfriend is quizzed and released at about the same time. She's shaken and exhausted but quite alright. She says they tried hard to pin it on her, and she was afraid that they would resort to torture. I marvel at her courage and resilience. I never thought she had that in her. There is one problem Takura is not back and he's unreachable. We go back to the Police station the following morning, and we are hit with a bombshell. He confessed. He's the one who stole the money. I request to see him but the Assistant Inspector insists we can only see him later since he was being further investigated for another theft. I'm stunned. Kudzai asks them a lot of questions, but they seem reluctant to cooperate. I ask them if they

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had asked Takura why he had stolen the money and they say he confessed that he was motivated by jealous and a spirit of competition. Hard to believe. It sounds like what someone would say to a Priest at a confessional, not to the Police. Also, Takura is the most humble guy you will ever see. I'm devastated. I can't even go to work. I call in sick, throw myself on the bed and start to cry buckets.

A call from my girlfriend wakes me up.

"Babes, how are you, are there any new developments regarding the theft?"

"Sekai, they arrested Takura, they say he confessed can you believe it," I say in a strangely hoarse voice.

I'm groggy.

"What? Are they mad? That's unbelievable," she says.

"Takura is too nice to do that, but what I have learnt in life is never to say never. Don't be too hard on yourself though. Let the police do their job."

"It's so devastating babe, I don't want to lie. That's one of the best friends I ever had," I say in a grim tone.

"But well, it is what it is. And you, how are you holding up?" I add.

"I'm devastated, I don't know what to do but I'm trying to hold my head up high otherwise I will be consumed with grief," she says sagely.

I marvel at the growth that has taken place in this lady.

"That's wonderful. Personally, I feel like I'm being torn apart by ravenous wolves. I'm not doing well Sekai. I need that money," I say

I can hear her heave over the phone. Now she's sobbing. Oh, my little babe. "I know, I know love, but what's done is done right love?"

I'm in awe of this lady's ability to put things into perspective. I have never known her to be that strong. She has freaked out violently for far less drastic things. I also thought her fragile, always in need of support and assurance. I'm pleasantly surprised. Maybe her Aunt has been drilling the essence of wife-hood in her quite strongly because nothing else explains this rapid and radical transformation. I have fallen in love again.

"Thank you love," I say "But... do you really understand... what this means?"

"You mean...?" she asks.

"I mean... the money is gone... so things have just got very complicated. You know... the lobola issue."

I'm not sure what to expect now.

"Oh..." she paused a bit. My heart is beating fast. "...I get it..." I heave a sigh of relief, so far she's saying what I want her to say. She continues, "I have already spoken to my Aunt."

She's speaking too slowly. Can you just drop the bombshell already? I'm nervous.



“...And she thinks her niece’s boyfriend is a big smelly liar right?” I say. I don’t know if I’m trying to sound witty or just preparing myself for the inevitable.

“No. not all,” she says. “She does understand. She wasn’t born yesterday Bheki.”

Amazing, I think. And beautiful. We talk about a few other things before she tells me she has to go somewhere and hangs up. I think of calling Tariro but I decide to call Mum first. She’s devastated. She was ready for a daughter-in-law but she assures me that all will be fine, eventually.

It’s two days later, and I still haven’t been able to talk with Takura. I have come to accept that it’s possible that he could genuinely have taken the money. It’s heartbreaking, but life is like that sometimes. Can’t believe ten years of friendship have just gone down the drain over some United States dollars. Ten solid years. I’m thinking of the time when I was down with malaria a few years ago and couldn’t do anything, anything at all, and he came and stayed with me for a week. Washing my clothes, cooking for me and reminding me to take my medication. He was really a friend in need. It’s really true that money is the root of all evil, well the love of it. ‘Jealousy’, ‘spirit of competition’, did he actually say that? Takura is the last person I would have expected to harbor jealousy. He’s too much of a sweet soul to be taken up in such entrapments. But also people are good at hiding things. Maybe he has never really liked me as I thought. Maybe it was all a façade right from the get-go. Maybe none of my friends really like me as they say they do. Maybe they are in this for their own benefit because humanity is incorrigibly selfish at the core. We have laughed, ate, lied, done everything together but maybe it was all a mirage. Nothing was done out of pure love. Does pure love actually exist or it’s in our nature as humans to try to force into existence things our idealism long for? We are idealistic and utopian at the core.

The truth is pure love can’t flow out of our irredeemable depravity. All it churns out is evil, or a mirage of good. But then I tend to believe in my exceptionality. I like to believe my intentions have always been pure. Like, I really love my friends from a place of total purity. I really love them. But the problem is not really me or all of us. It’s the species as a whole. It’s impossible to grow beyond your species because it would mean defying the core principles. You have to dismantle conventions and fundamental principles that have been in operation since the beginning of the world and that not possible. So we just trudge through this place as it is. There’s nothing we can do. We are predestinated for this. So, on some level, I can’t blame Takura. All this is a product of nature rather than nurture.

I’m plucked out of my thought process by a phone call. It’s Marcelo. I’m shocked because this is the first time he has called me in more than three months. Marcelo is a vendor. He sells avocados and apples close to my workplace. I have strong doubts that the avocados and apples are his main source of income. I suspect, from the dubious faces I see around him every time, that he might be dabbling in soft drugs. I think he sells weed. Marcelo is a big football fan, and that’s where our friendship stems from.

Our debates are usually intense and protracted but with an unmistakable touch of cordiality. He’s in the Ronaldo/Neymar camp while I’m in the Messi/Hazard camp. He also has an eidetic memory. He remembers games and events with dates, times, everything without difficulty. I don’t think I have ever come across anyone with such an excellent memory, I swear he’s wasting his talent selling avocados and apples, or whatever it is that he really sells.

“Hazardinho!” he shouts as I answer the phone. He calls me Hazardinho because of my love for Hazard I suspect.

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“Marcelo Marcelo, how are you my man?”

“I’m good Hazardinho, how is your money?” he says. It’s one of his signature greetings, but it sounds so ironic given the current events.

“It’s tough out here bro. The economy wants to kill everyone.” That’s my standard reply whenever he asks the question.

“It shall be fine in the end my G. It shall be well,” he said. Yeah, right, I think.

“Yeah I know bro. Him who is in the heavens has our back,” I say.

“Hazardinho, how is your girlfriend? That’s a heavy metal bro. You are feasting with kings, my man,” he says.

“Marcelo, are you drunk?” I ask. I can even afford a smile.

“You know I’m always under the hammer, bro,” he says, making his trademark husky chuckle.

“I know.” I can’t hold back my laughter too. “You have the keys to all the beerhalls in this town.”

“You know me too well”, he says.

There’s a momentary silence

“Hazardinho, We are brothers, right?” He says in a strangely solemn voice.

“Yes Marcelo, we are brothers forever what’s up?”

“We are brothers and brothers help each other out in times of need, right?” he asks.

Damn! He wants money. All this talk of brotherhood will end with a request for a loan. And this is the first time he’s asking me for money, for anything at all, really. What ridiculously poor timing is this?

“Marcelo, do you want money?” I say, the small talk is making me nervous.

“No Hazardinho, I want to help you out, brother to brother,” he says far too calmly.

Now I’m confused. Help me? With what? Did he hear about my predicament? Does he know the thief?

“Okay Marcelo. Tell me, what is it?”

“But brother, you might hate me after this.” His voice sounds different, there’s a hoarse nervousness in it.

Now my mouth is dry, and my heart is beating fast. I’m not sure what Marcelo is getting at. If it’s a game, he’s chosen the worst time to play it.

“Marcelo, what is it?” I ask, a bit more curtly than I expected.

I can hear him clearing his voice.



“Brother, I hope my eyesight deceived me, but I saw your girl appearing like she was kissing a man in a Mazda NP300 truck last night. I was with Fadiga, he can confirm too,” he says. ‘Fadiga’ is Marcelo’s friend. I don’t know his real name too.

I’m dumbstruck. My knees are losing strength now, and I feel as if my bowels are loosening. What? My girlfriend is cheating on me? No, that can’t be true. Both Marcelo and Fadiga saw wrong. There’s no way Sekai could do that to me. I have been so good to her. So supportive, so loving, so kind, so faithful – well except for the days Tariro visits – but I have tried my best. No. Lord No. It isn’t true.

“Mmm, Marcelo are you sure?” I say, “Sekai was out of town yesterday.” I’m trying to see if this is all a game. If Marcelo really saw perfectly or just thought he did. But the truth is I’m trying to convince myself that both Marcelo and Fadiga had simultaneous optical illusions.

“Brother, I don’t know about that, but I really looked carefully, I had to confirm and I think it really was her.”

“Marcelo, do you know it was Sekai or you think it was Sekai?” I ask.

“Hazardinho, listen to me. I don’t want to drive a wedge between you and your girlfriend. If I’m wrong or right, time will tell, but I also hope we didn’t see right.”

“So you are not 100% sure Marcelo right?”

“Brother, I just wanted to tell you this brother to brother. It’s up to you to take the information or discard it,” he says, suddenly sounding irritated.

“Bye Marcelo,” I say terminating the call.

I am angry. And agitated. And sad. And devastated. And weak in the knees. And sick in the stomach. I am inundated with every kind of feeling. I throw myself on the bed. I desperately want to cry. I have learnt that crying is therapeutic. I like the shame and vulnerability that comes with it. So I’m hoping to dissolve the labyrinth of feelings I’m currently experiencing in a flood of tears but nothing is forthcoming. I still think Marcelo saw wrong. To be honest, what I now have is hope. I’m hoping that Marcelo was wrong, though he sounded as if he was ready to bet both his kidneys. He sounded so convinced it rattled me. What if he’s right? What if my girlfriend is really cheating on me? I thought losing all my life’s savings was devastating, but this will completely crush me. I keep rolling on the bed, I can’t be still. My heart is about to explode I can feel. I can’t take it anymore now. I can’t push it out of my head, and I realize it’s impossible to live with the doubts. There are gnawing at my heart slowly but efficiently. If I don’t do something, I will run mad. Who can tell me the truth about this issue? Who can I trust to confirm without making myself look suspicious and desperate. I take my phone. Will have to call Marlon. Marlon is a University friend. He is in the loop about everything. If I want the truth, I will hear it from him. But do I really need to hear the truth? Do I really have the guts to stomach it when it comes in a form I don’t expect? I dial the number anyway.

“Marlon, how are you?” I say coolly.

“Ah, Mr. ‘Delineate’ how are you?” he says before breaking into a hearty laughter. My Macroeconomics lecturer gave me the sobriquet because of the frequency with which I used the word in my essays. Any other day I would have broken into fits of laughter but I’m not in the mood.

“Marlon, is my girlfriend cheating on me? Don’t lie to me,” I ask, going on the offensive straightaway. I’m feigning indifference, but the truth is someone is cooking pumpkins in my stomach. What’s funny is there’s no one I’m performing for except myself. Marlon stays silent for a few seconds, then in a measured tone says.

“Bheki what’s happening, are you fighting with Sekai?”

“No, not at all, we are not fighting, I just wanted to know. You know I’m marrying her soon right,” I say.

“Tell me the truth Bheki, what’s up?” he asking, I can discern something between curiosity and concern in his voice. I think he knows something and now I’m scared it’s not something I want to hear but I have already opened Pandora’s box so there’s no going back from here.

“Okay bro. I caught a text in her phone and I asked her who it was from and she said the guy was her friend” I lie.

“Oh? What’s the name of the guy?” he asks. He definitely knows something, and he probably even knows the name of the guy. Good Heavens, what have I got myself into here.

“Mmm, I can’t remember the name of the guy. Didn’t take it too seriously.”

He’s quiet for a while

“Bheki, I have heard rumors,” he finally says softly. Now I’m about to soil my pants. I’m sweating hard. My mind is in overdrive. My girlfriend is definitely cheating, well I’m 50% sure now. What’s left is her version.

“What rumors have you heard Marlon?” My voice is shaking.

“I heard Sekai was seen once or twice in compromising places with an older guy,” he says.

I’m on my knees. “The guy drives an NP300?” I ask, almost in tears now. Pause.

“I’m sorry bro, yes that’s the guy. The Assistant Inspector.”

The Assistant Inspector! I’m stunned. My phone falls to the ground. The world has just turned upside down on me. Why Sekai? Why?

Then she calls.

I don’t pick it up. I let it ring and ring and ring until it stops ringing. I can’t stand her right now. She has betrayed me. Takura betrayed my trust, but not at this level. I wake up hours later to ten missed calls. Why is she looking for me so much? Is it the guilt kicking in? She calls again. I kind of sympathize with her for some reason so I pick the call this time.

“Bheki, are you alright?” she asks, her voice brittle.

I probably would stand a better chance of being alright if you weren’t playing me.

“I’m okay, just the headache. I slept like a log.”

“I’m sorry Bheki, don’t be too hard on yourself love,” she says.



“Thank you, I was thinking, can you come to see me today. Is it possible love?”

“Of course honey, will be there in thirty minutes.”

She arrives thirty-five minutes later. We hug and exchange pleasantries. I pour her a glass of Fanta orange and a plate of cookies, and we talk about mundane stuff. The time has come. I lock the door. I think I detect a hint of surprise in her eyes. Is it a sign?

I sit on the arm of the couch. I feel like a spy movie villain as I start my monologue.

“I am going to tell you a story, babe. I don’t think I have told you this, though I might have mentioned it in passing.” I pause for a little while. She fixes me a quizzical look. I like it. I know I’m being too dramatic, but it’s adding to the thrill.

“I was bullied as a kid because I was tiny. I loved school, but only when we were in the building. Outside, it was a nightmare. Younger kids loved to pick fights with me because they knew they stood a chance, and the thrill of beating someone older than them impelled them further. It gave me low self-esteem and up to now I don’t think I have totally recovered.” I’m looking straight into her eyes. It’s clear she doesn’t know what I’m getting at. “You see, I suffered because I couldn’t fight back. I wanted to, but genuinely couldn’t. Even now, I’m not particularly a good fighter. I think most women stand a good chance against me in a fair fight. I see you are wondering what I’m driving at. It’s a simple thing. I just want clarification on a certain issue that has been troubling me, and babes, I would prefer if you tell me the whole truth.”

She flinches. She looks unsettled now. She doesn’t speak. I like it that way.

“I want to assure you that if you cooperate with me, this issue will be resolved quickly.” Now, I’m being too dramatic. She keeps quiet. I think she getting a clue where this is heading because she’s heaving deep sighs.

“I only need clarification, just that. As I told you before, I’m by no means a good fighter. I’m a terrible fighter even but today I’m prepared to do my best.”

She raises her eyebrows. I have never threatened her, not even once. It’s the first time.

“I don’t hit women either, firstly, because it’s not proper and secondly, because they can actually beat me up but one thing is certain, I won’t allow you to pass that door without you telling me the whole truth.”

She smirks, but it looks contrived.

“Look at me babes,” I say. She looks up and smiles, but her eyes tell a different story.

She stands up and lets out a strange sound. Then she starts sobbing. I don’t even pretend I want to comfort her. I’m waiting for her to finish her histrionics and continue with the conversation.

“Bheki, is that what you called me for. This rubbish Bheki? If you think I will stay for this load of trash, you got another think coming,” she blurts out. She comes close to me. I can see she’s testing me, sizing me up. She goes for my right hand, which holds the keys. I clench the hand tight.

“So here is what you are going to do. You are going to sit down on the couch and tell me everything there is to tell. I’m not letting you go until you tell me the whole truth. Every little detail. We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” I can’t believe I’m talking like a spy thriller villain from the 60s.

She looks at me and nods. She chooses the easy way. Then suddenly, she does it. She knees me in the groin. I fall to my knees, she didn’t connect perfectly, but it’s still excruciating and she has succeeded in her mission because I drop the keys. She leaps to get them and heads for the door. I’m still in pain but I manage to throw a leg desperately into her path, it connects and she falls. I lunge on to her and grab her heels and pull her back. I keep pulling. It’s a clumsy battle. None of us is willing to accept defeat. My strength is coming back now, we stagger up at about the same time. She still has the keys. I can’t get them. We lock eyes, like two featherweight boxers in the eleventh round, except we both can’t fight to save our lives. Literally it seems, though I admit that for a girl, she’s decent. I suddenly trip her to the ground. Probably the only fighting move I know practically. She doesn’t expect it. She falls with a thud. I win because I hear the clicking sound of a bunch of keys dropping. I quickly snatch them and put them in my pocket.

She’s wincing but I don’t think she’s in too much in pain. She rises slowly now and takes a look in the mirror, takes a comp and straightens her weave before leaning against the wardrobe. She’s trying to control her breath. We are both silent for a while. She’s now looking into space like she’s in meditation.

Suddenly she fixes me a stony gaze and says authoritatively “Now, you listen boy, It’s my turn to tell you a story so sit back and relax, we are going on a long ride and when we reach the destination, we will never be the same again,” she pauses a bit. I thought I was dramatic. This right here is drama at a whole new level.

“So I have been in a lot of relationships but none of them has remotely come close to lasting this long. Why? Because you are a good guy. Too good even. You don’t question a lot of things. It’s a very good quality, but it also makes you vulnerable. You are a loving guy. Too loving. And too trusting. Bheki, you are a special guy. You made me comfortable in this relationship. I have never been comfortable in any relationship before. Bheki, you are also so assured. You are a pure soul. You believe in humanity. You never doubted my love for you, not even once. You don’t demand, you don’t ask questions.”

Pause.

“Bheki, you demanded to know the truth. I know you are not ready, but I will tell you anyway. I shielded the truth from you because your heart is too fragile, I didn’t want you to get hurt. The truth hurts my love, always. It’s designed that way.”

“Bheki, I have a five-year-old kid.”

Pause.

“You’re shocked, I can tell. Yes, I do. She stays with my granny in the rural areas. Bombshell? I have bigger ones darling, sit tight.”

I do exactly that. I’m ready for it all. What can be more shocking than your girlfriend hiding a child from you for two years? Nothing I tell you.

She continues, “The baby obviously has a father and you know him.”



Pause. Yes, it can really get worse. I keep quiet still.

“The father is none other than the Assistant Inspector babe. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth you were asking for. Truth is unpleasant.”

Yup. I’m totally done now. She was right, this is an even bigger shocker. I’m just staring at the ceiling with my mind totally blank.

Drop another jaw dropper babe, I’m beginning to enjoy the torture, is that what they call Stockholm’s syndrome babes? No, that’s not the term; the correct term is... masochism, right?

She continues, “I don’t think I have really loved the Assistant Inspector, but he was there for me when no one was. He came into my life when no one treated me like a real person. My dad had chased me out of the home after I came back home after seven PM. He told me to go wherever I was. The boy I was with also chased me away, though he stayed alone and was gainfully employed. He blocked my number and told me not to contact him ever again.” I can see she’s about to break into tears.

Get over yourself young lady; you’re are not the victim here.

“My mother didn’t even bother reaching out to me. She was too busy ingratiating herself with Dad to care about me. I went to stay with an Aunt who treated me like her maid, but at least I had a place to stay. That’s when I met the Assistant Inspector. He was married, but he cared about me. I know you’re judging me, and I can’t blame you. You cannot begin to imagine what I was going through. He became the only pillar of strength in my life.” She takes a sip of Fanta and licks her lips. I have my head clasped in my hands now. Nothing is making sense.

She continues, “He rented me a room in town and came to see me often. So that’s how I got the baby. Mum never liked her, or she was afraid of Dad, so I took her to my granny and left her there. Then we broke up with the Assistant Inspector because he saw me with another boy. The boy was just a friend, well, that kind of friend. Can you believe that he beat both of us up and called me an ungrateful whore?” Her eyes are full of tears.

Again young lady, stop manipulating me with your performance. Now I’m beginning to feel a frisson of sympathy for you. You are not the victim here, I am. I don’t say anything. I let her speak.

“So that’s how I broke up with him. I cried about it a lot. He broke my heart. Then Dad suddenly mellowed toward me and called me back home Maybe it’s because he was sick. From there for some reason, I felt a need to break boys’ hearts and I did. Deliberately. Numerous times. And I didn’t care. Until I met you. You showed me true love. I tried to break your heart but I failed...” her voice trails off.

You didn’t fail, I just didn’t catch you. Please get over yourself. I don’t respond. There’s no need to respond. There’s nothing to respond to.

“Bheki, I cheated on you many times, but you never found out. It was as if you never cared to find out. One of the guys I cheated is your work colleague. Happened right under your nose and you didn’t suspect anything. What kind of person are you Bheki?”

Junias Tinashe

A fool, that's what I am. A massive fool.

I'm numb to the blows now. Completely numb.

She coughs, then continues. "Anyway, I think it's time to address your question," she pauses a bit.

I no longer care.

"Yes, I'm seeing the Assistant Inspector. We kissed and made up. That's what you want to hear, right? The truth? Now you are hearing it. It's not so pleasant, huh?" I can't believe the lady thinks I'm somehow to blame for wanting to know the truth. Psycho.

She continued, "It's been going on for six months now. He divorced his wife, so we are back together now, but I still love you, Bheki."

Now I'm convinced she's possessed. Completely possessed by a territorial demon because the girl I knew wasn't flagrant like that.

"I know the question in your mind right now is: Why then was I pushing with the lobola issue and actually making arrangements? The thing is, I'm just as confused as any other girl. It's a gender thing. I sometimes don't know what I want. Do I want a nice, young, smart, inexperienced, idealistic, naïve gentleman or a middle-aged, experienced man who can control me? I'm not sure. So on some level I still want — let me say wanted because its in the past now — to be married to you. It's safer because no one will judge me and it will look good on Instagram but it will be unfair on you trust me. So, though I had dreams of marrying you sometimes, I still had a lot of doubts about our compatibility. Our marriage was doomed to fail before it started, love. I know what I'm saying is confusing, but trust me, it makes sense."

"Now babe, brace yourself of the heaviest of them all. This will make you sick in the stomach babes."

Another one? Are you for real? I'm trying to imagine what could be worse than what she already said. Wait... did she give me HI... Oh no.

She continues.

"The Inspector wants to marry me, but my parents won't approve. He's renovating his house, and he was short of money, so he asked me to take a loan."

Wait a minute, is this girl trying to say what I think she is trying to say? Let it not be true, Lord.

"I almost took the loan, then I remembered something. Bheki don't look too far. I'm the one who took your money. It's not Takura we just framed him because he was the easiest to frame. Low-hanging fruit. We planned it all well beforehand. I'm sorry, Bheki, but you forced the truth out of me, and the truth is not pleasant. And to be honest, the Assistant Inspector's needing the money for the renovation is not the major reason the plan was hatched. The real reason was to stop the lobola at all costs without arousing suspicion. So there you have it, Bheki; the truth, the whole truth and nothing but."



I think I'm dreaming because I'm pinching myself hard, and I'm feeling nothing. I realize I was wrong to think that my girlfriend – my erstwhile girlfriend – is possessed by a demon. That's silly because how can a demon be possessed by another demon?

Then she adds, far too casually, "And your best friend Kudzai isn't exactly clean. He is privy to this, at least in part. He never wanted me to marry you. Yeah you guessed right love, he loves me too. He asked me out a couple of times and I refused but we made arrangements, like those ones you have with Tariro yes I know about Tari love, that's the line your friend used when he was trying to woo me," she says, looking wistfully at me like an artist admiring a medieval painting.

"Oh, about your money...." she says as if it's an afterthought. "You will get it. Sooner rather than later. I was always going to find a way to bring it back. If the Assistant Inspector has already used it, I will take a loan and pay you back. As for your friend, we shall find a way to bring him out. Your good friend," she pauses. "We shall find a way to get him out."

WE! There you have it. She's a raging narcissist. She thinks she has the world wrapped on her little finger. She thinks she's the 5'4, fifty-three kilograms version of Thanos. But isn't she, though? Because she can really do what she's saying. She really can release my friend.

"Do you know your friends Takura and Kudzai fought over me sometime last year? And they lied to you that they were drunk and had a scuffle over a random girl? Well, the random girl was me. The random girl was your beloved girlfriend. They fought over me like a pair of spotted hyenas. You friends. Who does that?"

She's says laughing. The laugh is sinister. I know about witches, I grew up to tales about them and I knew one or two by name. I was very scared of them. But what I'm witnessing today is beyond witchcraft. Far beyond. Witches have boundaries. This individual right here definitely doesn't. I think even demons have boundaries. This right here is one of those demons that influence cities and nations, not the small ones that possess people. She is a principality. That's what she is. Because how do you do it? How do you cheat on your boyfriend with his friends and not feel anything? How do you steal your boyfriend's life savings and still have the effrontery to call him names of endearment? Like, how do you do that? Unless you are a demon, a principality in human form. Like how callous do you need to be to sit there comfortably and tell someone you pretend to love that his friends are nothing but conniving scoundrels without a shred of moral decency And not because you care either, but because you enjoy seeing him — your supposed lover — in pain?

I bury my head in my hands, I can't speak. It's pointless and exhausting.

She breaks the momentary silence.

"So Bheki, I'm here. Ready to be sacrificed on the altar. Do what you want with me. I'm ready for whatever punishment you have for me."

Oh please, get over yourself, you self-absorbed narcissist. You couldn't find 'sacrifice' in the book of Leviticus.

I hand her the keys. "Go." That's all I manage to say.

"You can't even punish me. You can't even unleash your wrath on me. All that chutzpah was a show, right? But I will give it to you, you made a pretty good show. But in the end, you are still the same old Bheki. Weak and too nice."

Junias Tinashe

She walks over to me and, like the demon that she is, kisses me on the forehead and walks out.

“Goodbye Bheki,” she says, while throwing back the keys.

I slide from my couch onto the floor.

Ataho Musiime



Ataho Musiime is a 19-year-old Ugandan American. Musiime enjoys coming up with film concepts and writing screenplays. He is particularly passionate about science fiction and aspires to share his stories with audiences one day.

Journey Across Worlds

It was a gloomy morning as usual. Tamik awoke from his oxygen chamber and reached for his gas mask. He mustn't ever forget to wear his gas mask. Four years he's been living on this world, he never intended to stay this long, but the work was good, and the people were kind. He walked across his circular apartment over to his kitchen and reached for a piece of his tasteless bread. With the bread, he grabbed the artificial taste chips he had picked up last week, set the taste—Earth: Pizza, 21st Century—and popped it in, chewing the bread simultaneously. 21st Century Pizza was his favorite setting, and he gets it as a treat for himself every now and then.

He put on his cloak, gloves and boots. Encased in the pocket of his cloak was a remote, which he took out and pressed ON.

A robotic figure on the ground illuminated.

"Hello sir. How was your sleep?" his Automan asked in its metallic tone.

"It was good, thanks Otto. Did you get a good charge?" Tamik responded.

"Yes, sir, it was quite refreshing."

"Where are the others?"

"They still have 46 hours of charge left because of your last trip, sir."

"I see...I'll need to find better cases for their processing units. We'll have to go without them. Come on."

"On my way sir"

Tamik put his gas mask on as his door slid open. He stepped out into the gas-intoxicated environment with Otto by his side. He walked ten minutes to his local tube station—a walk he had done too many times—and entered the line. Three people were in line, and one by one, they were each briskly sucked down to the underground tube connections of the planet's interior. Four years on this world and Tamik still got a thrill from taking the tube. He stepped into the tall cylinder compartment, strapped himself in, and set his destination for the interplanet port. With that, he descended.

Moving at the usual fast pace of the tube, he was whisked through the planet's underground cities. He could see, through the glass, where the wealthy stayed, hiding away from the toxic fumes of the surface. The poor of the world were forced to live above in the dangerous environment, wearing gas masks outdoors to avoid sickness or even death.

Tamik arrived at the interplanet port, and immediately was checked by the Automan guards, who were much bigger and had more equipped cases than his Otto. Once he passed the checks, he proceeded to the teleportation bus waiting area.

For some reason, there was a delay upon entry to the area. Each person in the waiting area was being called into a room for what they were told by the guards was a 'random customary check'.

Tamik observed the faces of the people who walked out of the room. They bore mixed



reactions. Some were horrified, some looked intrigued by what they had just seen, and some were filled with energy, gossiping in low whispers. Tamik became anxious to see what he would find when he was eventually called up.

Tamik walked in, his eyes immediately dilating. He thought The Beings were a myth, and the little belief he had, he was sure he would never see one with his own eyes. But there they were, the floating creatures encased in a sleek, white, spherical case with the bright blue light in the center, exactly as it was in the illustrations.

The Beings, as the myth went, were a race of super-intelligent aliens. It was said that they formed an alliance with the humans of earth, giving them access to hundreds of worlds across the universe. In return, the humans allowed them constant surveillance across the worlds. No one knew what for.

The two Beings stayed hovering for a moment. Tamik couldn't tell if they were staring at him or if they even noticed that he entered the room. They made a strange noise. Tamik had not heard any such sound in his life. He could only assume this was their way of communicating. They both turned to him, continuing to 'speak'.

"S-Sorry, I- don't understand..." he stammered.

An old man walked in behind him, "Hello, young man."

"Hello," Tamik responded, still shaken.

"Ah, I see you've met my friends," the Old Man said.

"Friends..."

"Yes, my friends here." The Old Man proceeded to speak in a language that Tamik, even in all his years of interplanetary travel, had never heard anything quite like before. A strange dialect, similar to that of the Beings.

The Beings seemed to respond to the old man, humming back in their strange twang that Tamik found to be creepily unsettling.

The old man turned back to Tamik.

"What's your name?"

"Tamik,"

"You were headed to Nix Mundi II, yes?"

Tamik nodded.

"My friends and I have recommended that you accompany me on a journey, a quest if you like. Your travel referral has already been changed."

"What? I have an appointment to sell my Automan's case and processing units..."

“... But not your Automan?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You said you were selling your Automan’s case and processing unit. Is that not simply...selling your Automan?”

“Well... I suppose it is.”

“Indeed. Unless you go out of your way to copy the processing units of your Automans, in fear of losing them and being alone.”

Tamik immediately felt a wave of insecurity wash over him. The old man was correct. He was so lonely that he couldn’t even let go of Otto, or any other of his Automans. They had become his closest friends, and family, for that matter. Whenever it was time to sell one of them, he would copy their processing units. The units contain their personalities and their memories. Once copied, Tamik would put the units in a new case, so their appearance and function would change, but everything that made them who they were would remain intact. Automans were not humans. Far from them. But Tamik certainly treated them that way.

“If I may ask. How long have you been living on this world, and what age were you when you arrived?”

“I got here when I was 16... I’m 23 now.” Saying it out loud made Tamik feel even worse about that fact.

“It’s time for you to begin your life, Tamik. Come with me, see worlds you’ve never dreamed of seeing. You are such a young soul, and you have an amazing destiny ahead of you, trust me.”

“But I have a life here. I’m making a living, which is what I wanted for myself. If I go, it’s as if to say I’m ungrateful.” Tamik hadn’t meant to share that much, but he felt comfortable telling the old man for some reason.

“You’ve fulfilled your purpose here...now it’s time to move on to a greater one.”

Tamik took a moment to digest all the information he had just received. He had been unhappy of late, and this could well be an opportunity to escape his situation. “What kind of ‘quest’ is this? What are we seeking?”

“For me to know I can trust you, this decision must be a leap of faith. Don’t worry, I will tell you on the way, but right now, you must choose to come and dive into the unknown or take the safe route and stay here.”

Tamik didn’t like this, but his mind and heart had already married the idea of this journey.

“Fine, when do we leave?”

“Now, my friend!” the old man said with a face of glee.

Tamik looked at the Beings one last time as he followed the old man out of the room.





As they sat in the small two-person teleportation bus, the old man asked Tamik many questions about his life. He asked of his family and his home planet and what led him to live on this world.

He then asked about Tamik's love life, which was what drove Tamik to ask some questions about the old man instead.

"What about you? You haven't even told me your name. Where are you from, and how do you know the Beings?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you where I'm from or what my name is..."

"What about your relationship with the Beings?"

"I promised them I would keep that information confidential."

Tamik ceased asking any questions about the old man, but he did have one more that had been on his mind.

"Why did you and your *friends* want me for this quest?"

The old man smirked as he manoeuvred the bus.

"In time, you will know."

Tamik looked ahead through the bus' front window. He could see they were approaching the large teleportation field. He had never seen it up close like this. He could see its ripples and the crackling blue electricity. The bus passed through, and instantaneously, they were on a different world. Tamik looked out his window. For as far as he could see, all there was was water. They were on an Aquarum Planetae.

"Have you ever been on a water world before?"

"Once, when I was a kid."

"Well, things have changed. A lot."

"How so—" Tamik was hardly done asking his question when he felt a big thump from his side of the bus. They were knocked off balance for a moment. "What the hell was that?" He screamed.

"Pirates," the old man replied calmly.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You heard me."

The pirates grabbed the bus with a large claw-like mechanism and placed it on their ship's surface.



The one who appeared to be the leader of the pirates asked the tied-up old man and Tamik what their intent was on the planet. The old man responded by telling him they needed to use their second teleportation station so they could continue on their journey to Tualias Mundi.

The pirates got a hearty laugh from that.

“You expect us to just let two strangers who look relatively fit and could be useful workers to just walk away? Besides, we are doing you a favor! You lot would never make it to Tualias Mundi anyway!” The pirate leader beckoned, his voice matching his big and wide frame.

Meanwhile, Tamik was very attentive when the old man was speaking because this was the first time that he had gotten a hint as to what their journey’s purpose was.

The leader of the pirates, still amused with a smile on his face, went to grab a glass of water. He sat down in front of Tamik and the old man and began discussing with his fellow pirates what should be done with the pair. As he lifted the cup to take his first sip, the water began to levitate away all of a sudden, floating right to Tamik.

The old man began to smile.

The pirates looked in awe. The leader spoke, “So you meant what you said. You are granted passage to wherever you need to go.”

With that, the old man, followed by a puzzled Tamik, headed back to their teleportation bus to make their way to the planet’s second teleportation station.



“What the hell was that? First, the waters started floating, and then they just let us go?”

“Indeed.”

“No! For once, I want answers from you! I’ve followed you around like a stray Automan. Now it’s time you finally tell me what the hell is going on!”

The old man sighed.

“The water floating is called an omen. When the gravity of any of the elements is manipulated, it means that one is close to fulfilling their personal legend and achieving full peace.”

“So why would the pirates care about my personal legend?”

“Because of where we are going... Tualias Mundi.” The old man explained to Tamik that Tualias Mundi, or Mecca world, was a planet that brought one the closest to God and the afterlife, the closest one could possibly be while in the realm of the living.



Tamik kept quiet from then on. He was satisfied with the old man's answer and decided to get some rest.



Tamik awoke from an uncomfortable but much-needed sleep. His head pressed against the window; the first sight he saw was the fire-lit homes and ships among the darkness of the sea. He turned his head and saw the old man, still awake as if he hadn't just been flying the bus for 15 hours with only one break. Instantly, Tamik remembered the conversation he had with him hours earlier about the strange occurrence back on Nix Mundi.

"Are we almost there?" Tamik asked groggily.

"Almost," the old man said.

About 15 minutes later, the bus was passing through the teleportation field. Tamik braced himself for whatever world he would find himself on next.

Upon entry, Tamik couldn't tell which world this was because they were passing through clouds. The bus sped past what looked like a floating island. As they emerged from among a flock of clouds, Tamik saw it. No land was in sight, it was as if there were only layers upon layers, rows upon rows, of the floating islands. Some of the smaller ones looked like houses, and the bigger ones had tall buildings and mini-cities with bridges connecting them. The old man merged into the freeway, where they joined other flying vehicles zipping across the sky. Tamik admired the beauty of the city in the sky, the golden sun making it all the more mesmerizing to stare at.

"So are we just passing through again or do we have a purpose on this world?" Tamik asked.

"We are here looking for a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

Tamik smirked. He saw this as an opportunity to poke fun at the old man and maybe lighten up their stiff relationship. "So, is there a history with this woman or..."

The old man cracked a rare smile.

"Why are you blushing?" Tamik said, laughing.

"Shut up child," the old man said, still smiling. He parked the bus on a vehicle island.

Tamik exited the bus and took in the thin air.

"We'll catch a train. She lives in the scarcer areas on the outskirts of the city."

"You're the boss, boss."



Ataho Musiime

Tamik had really enjoyed the view from the train ride. Even though he had been on this planet just a couple hours, he was already in love with it. *Maybe once this whole journey is completed, I can come here to stay*, he thought.



They exited onto an island that had its own artificial grass. The grass was tall and had a yellowish-green color. It reminded Tamik of his home planet.

“She lives just up there,” the old man said, pointing to a tiny, old-looking shack on a hill.

They began to walk up, passing playing children, and chatting parents. Tamik found himself smiling and looking at them for a bit too long. *That must be nice*, he thought.

The old man knocked on the door rhythmically eleven times.

“Special knock?” Tamik asked.

Then, almost as soon as Tamik closed his mouth, a loud yell rang out. “Is that who I think it is?!”

The old man sighed and looked down with a smirk.

The door swung open and a short old lady in ancient dress looked up at the old man. She said, “I didn’t think your petty self would ever come back to see me.”

“Yes, well I’m here. Good to see you too.”

The old lady turned and looked up at Tamik.

“And who is this dashing young man you’ve brought me?” She maintained eye contact with Tamik as she spoke, as if she was staring into his soul.

“Ah, yes. Tamik this is Iliza. Iliza this is Tamik.”

Tamik and the old lady shook hands.

“So, what do you want?” she said, looking up at the old man.

The old man scoffed. “The same thing I’ve wanted for the past 35 years.”

“Ah, you still desire passage to Tualias Mundi. You don’t give up, do you?”

“You know I can’t.”

“And why do you need the boy?”

The old man kept quiet.

“Very well, spend the night, and we’ll start tomorrow.”

“Excuse me, I’m sorry. Start what tomorrow?” Tamik cut in.



“Training!” Iliza responded.

Tamik and the old man traded looks.

“Come, let me show you your rooms,” Iliza said, walking inside her shack.

“Rooms?” Tamik asked, questioning if they could all fit in the tiny, cramped shed.

The old man and Iliza laughed.

“Just come in!” Iliza exclaimed.



Tamik couldn’t believe what he saw when he walked in. What on the outside looked like a small run-down shack, on the inside was a lavish palace. It had polished marble floors, paintings on the wall, and a staircase leading to a second floor. It had a kitchen and even a living room equipped with a Holo-vision set!

Tamik, shocked, ran back outside to look at the exterior once more. It was still the same small shack. He ran back in and out three times before Iliza and the old man finally told him to stop.

“How is this possible?” Tamik asked, wide-eyed.

“Come, let me show you to your room and I will tell you.”

Tamik followed Iliza up the stairs until she halted when she realized the old man was trailing behind them.

“Ah ah ah! Not you! Just me and the boy. Go to the kitchen and make yourself a 21st-century hamburger—your favorite.”

The old man wanted to protest, but he allowed it. He was very hungry after all.



“So you want to know how this place is bigger on the inside?” Iliza asked.

Tamik nodded with a curious look on his face.

“Real magic,” the old woman whispered before laughing at Tamik’s shocked expression. “You should see the look on your face!” She laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

Iliza ceased her laughter so she could explain to Tamik. “Real magic does exist, but this isn’t it. I was only granted access to future technology.”

“How?”

Todd must have introduced you to the Beings by now, right?”

“Ah, yes. And hold on...Todd?” Tamik said, amused.

“That’s not his real name! That’s just something I call him to tease him,” Iliza said with a chuckle.

“Oh,” Tamik said, a bit disappointed.

“I have no idea why he is so secretive about his name. It’s quite stupid if you ask me.”

“Do you know it?”

“Yes.”

There was a momentary silence before Iliza told Tamik that she swore to her friend, ‘Todd’, that she wouldn't tell anyone. She showed Tamik to his room, and almost as soon as his face hit the pillow, he began to drift off, not knowing what the next day held.



Early in the morning, Tamik was awakened by both Iliza and the old man. They explained to him, finally, what he and the old man were going to be trained for. Tualias Mundi was not open to just anyone. It requires one who desires entry to have ultimate peace and absolute belief, trust, and faith in God.

Days and months passed. Tamik and the old man went through the vigorous spiritual training. At times, Tamik thought it to be too much for him, but his support system, Iliza and the old man, refused to let him quit. The two often made him remember his own mother and father. Even though the tasks were difficult, Tamik was happy. His love for this world grew as the days went by, and he was well cared for.



A little over a year had passed and Tamik felt more spiritually in tune than ever. On an ordinary day, Iliza suddenly felt her work was done.

“You are now ready, Tamik,” Iliza told Tamik.

“How can you know?”

“Don’t you feel it? I can sense it even in the way you talk. You’ve matured.”

“What about our friend, Todd?”

“He’s been ready for a long time. You both will set off tomorrow.”

The next day came, with Tamik and the old man leaving for their brand-new teleportation bus. Iliza stopped them.

“My intuition tells me it is time for you two to part ways. You must take separate buses.”

“But we are both going to Tualias Mundi!” Tamik protested.

“No, no, young one. We must trust her. It is said that one can only enter Mecca World alone anyway.” The old man said.

Tamik looked around. There was another brand-new bus just behind. “Fine... I’ll see you there, old man,” he shrugged.

The old man smirked.

Tamik and Iliza met in a warm embrace. He thanked her for everything, then turned and entered his bus. He looked out and saw the old man and Iliza talking. They hugged and then the old man made his way to his own bus. They took off at the same time, and as they were ascending, both looked down to see Iliza waving to them from her island.



Across the distance, the two buses travelled together to the teleportation field. Tuslias Mundi must be entered from outer space, so that’s where they would be teleported. Tamik had never been to outer space. He only saw it on Holo-vision shows and movies.

He made eye contact with the old man as they approached the teleportation field. They smiled at each other, and then looked forward to brace themselves for entry. Then, with the usual blue flash of light, they passed through.

“Huh?!” Tamik exclaimed in shock.

He was expecting to see a black canvas illuminated by the stars, but instead, all he could see was a purple sky covered in clouds and fog. He looked all around him, but the old man was nowhere in sight. He continued to steer his bus until it emerged from the fog, showing him more of the new world he was on.

He descended on what looked like a regular desert planet, although everything was weirdly purple. The sand, the clouds, and the sun, all in different variants of the cool color. All of the sudden, the energy of Tamik’s bus began to waver. A teleportation would normally deplete some of your vehicle’s charge, but because Tamik hadn’t accounted for a jump to this particular world, he didn’t add extra energy. He had just enough left to land safely on the purple landscape.

He sat for a moment, staring into the vast desert, wondering what to do. The purple sun was just beginning to set, and he could sense the coming chilliness of the night. He’d have to find some shelter, as his ship’s energy was now completely gone, and there would be no heating.

He walked for about 20 minutes before he caught sight of a small town in the distance. He thanked God that even in such a dilemma, he was provided with some fortune. He also understood that everything happened for a reason, and this may yet prove to be a good thing, somehow.

By the time he got to the town, the people were all locked in their houses. Tamik stood in the middle of what he assumed to be the town square with his head on a swivel, looking to see if anyone would come into view. After a few glances around, he found a corner and lay down. He removed his cloak and threw it over himself as a blanket for at least some attempt at warmth in the unmerciful cold night. He closed his eyes.



Ataho Musiime

“Hello?”

It was a female voice.

Tamik opened his eyes.

“Hi,” she said, smiling awkwardly.

“Hi,” Tamik responded, his voice cracked and raspy from the sleep.

The girl giggled. “Do you need a place to stay for the night?”

“Oh, uhhh yeah! Yes. Thank you,” Tamik said, still a bit disoriented and overwhelmed by the girl's beauty.

Tamik entered the warmth of the house and shuddered, full of relief.

“By the way, I’m Lyla,”

“Tamik is my name,” he said awkwardly.

“I see you still cold. You can go sit by the fire while I prepare you supper and a warm drink.”

“Oh, thanks!”

Lyla prepared the supper as Tamik warmed up. Once finished, she sat down and traded stories with her new guest. She told Tamik about her world, and her father's item shop. In return, Tamik told her all about the old man and Iliza and his training for Tualias Mundi. Lyla’s eyes were filled with curiosity and amazement.

They finally got tired after a while, and Lyla unintentionally fell asleep on Tamik.

Tamik was shocked. He hadn’t really done anything with a girl before, because of his work. This was what he told himself at least. He put his hands around her, trying his best to slow down his fast-beating heart and fall asleep.

The next morning, Tamik met Lyla’s unassuming father and it took a lot of explaining as to why there was a stranger in his house with his daughter. Lyla explained to him that Tamik was seeking entry to Tualias Mundi, and that he was marooned here.

“I see,” the father said. “He can stay with us as long as he works.”

So he did. After many months living on the world, Tamik grew closer to Lyla. Her father and everyone in that small town became like family. He slowly forgot about his purpose to go to Mecca World. Sometimes he thought of the old man and wondered if he reached his goal, but it was never anything more than that. He was happy where he was and wanted to stay there as long as he could.



Tamik woke up next to Lyla who was still fast asleep. That day marked one year since he had arrived on the planet. He got out of bed and kissed her on the forehead. He got ready and left for work.



It was a busy day, so he was occupied with customers most of the time.

Sometime in the afternoon, out of nowhere, a commotion could be heard outside. People were screaming to the gods. Tamik, along with the rest of the shop, ran outside.

His heart stopped when he saw it. Just like at Nix Mundi years ago, water was floating. This time though, it was on a much bigger scale, the water being from an entire well. Tamik looked at it until it splashed down to the ground.

For the rest of the day, the whole town was buzzing about what occurred at the square. Lyla's father had to close the shop because people were using it as a meeting point to talk about the event.

Lyla and Tamik sat down near the fireplace.

"It's just like what you told me, with the pirates," Lyla said.

"Yeah."

"Do you think it's a sign? That you have to continue your journey."

"I don't know."

"I mean, it's been a year since you arrived here, so it makes sense."

"Yeah. Like I said, I don't know."

Lyla ran her fingers through Tamik's hair. "I think you do," she said.

"But it's been so long, and I've made a life here, with you."

"I know, and I'll be here when you come back."

"What if I don't come back?"

"That's something I'll have to live with, but you have to pursue your personal legend. You are even more at peace now than you were a year ago, I can imagine."

Tamik was still reluctant. Then, the flames in front of them began to rise before dispersing in a similar way to the water. The two made eye contact, and they knew it was time.

The next day, Tamik said his goodbyes to the people of the town. He was able to retool his teleportation bus so it could hold a larger capacity of energy, just in case something went wrong again. When it was time for him to leave, Lyla, and even her father, were emotional. They all hugged, hoping one day they'd all be together again.



Tamik passed through the teleportation field, and he thanked the gods that he ended up in outer space. He already found himself missing Lyla. *She would have loved this*, he thought.

In the distance, there he saw it. A shining world that could almost be mistaken for a star, just as Iliza had described to him. He began to steer his ship there when boom, his bus was hit with a laser beam. The defence shields were automatically activated.

“God, why do you test me!?” Tamik exclaimed, looking upwards.

The beams continued to hit the bus from both sides. It appeared that Tamik was in the crossfire of a battle between two worlds. The bus’ energy was being used up quickly because of the defense shields. He knew the energy he had left wouldn’t make it to his destination if he didn’t break out of the crossfire, so he turned to the left and sped for that world.

He barely made it before crash-landing in a field near a big city. He crawled out of the bus and began walking towards the city.

As he walked through the city, the people stared at him wide-eyed. Tamik noticed them but was more concerned with how futuristic and sophisticated this world’s city looked. The staring turned into loud murmurs until a hovering vehicle pulled up next to the confused Tamik. The door of the long vehicle slid open, and a voice could be heard from the tinted windows telling Tamik to get in. He didn’t have many options at this point, so he did as the voice said.

Tamik sat in the backseat with not a word exchanged between him and the front. Another black-tinted window separated them, so he couldn’t even see whose custody he was in. He could tell they had gone underground because of the long descent the vehicle had taken. When they stopped, the door slid open, and he hesitated before he stepped out. When he stood up, he looked around and saw all sorts of military weapons, ships, and soldiers in the biggest hangar he had ever seen.

“What does the name Lyla mean to you?”

Tamik turned around quickly. Who was it that said the name of the one he loved? “What did you say?” he asked.

The military general repeated himself, observing Tamik’s face as he spoke. “He’s the one. Let’s take him to the site,” he told the men behind him.

The men behind him obeyed, but they whispered as though they were giddy children. Tamik overheard the words ‘Prophecy’ and ‘Real’. Soon, the general, his men, and Tamik entered a lift and descended once more. The doors of the lift opened, and lying outside was a dark cave-looking tunnel. The group walked through, illuminating the way with green-light lamps.

“I can imagine you are confused right now,” the general said without taking the fixation of his eyes away from the path.

“You think?” Tamik said, trying to respond in a cheeky manner.

“Well, let me do my best to explain. Our world has been at war with the world opposite us ever since their planet just appeared out of thin air. One day, we were alone, and then boom, this planet just showed up. Our world had only ever been in one other long-lasting war before, hundreds of years ago. When that war concluded, a prophecy said that another war would come, and the only one with the power to stop it would be a strange foreigner. The only hint we were given as to who this foreigner is that he has some emotional connection with the name Lyla.”

Tamik took all this information in. The prophecy seemed pointed at him. But how?

“Ok, we’re here,” the general announced.



They arrived in an ancient-looking room, and that's when Tamik saw them. He didn't ever think he'd see the Beings again, but there they were.

"These Beings have been aiding us ever since this war started, but we can't seem to decipher their language."

Tamik stared at the Beings, and the Beings stared at him.

The Beings, in the same way they did in his first encounter with them, started talking in their strange language. This time, however, Tamik understood understand. They were saying: *"This is the one, this is the one."*

Tamik responded to them in the same strange dialect that the old man had used those years ago, *"I am the one for what?"* he asked, shocking himself. He had never studied or even spoken that language before.

The beings told Tamik that he spoke their language because he had had the proper spiritual training. They explained to him that their race comes from the absurdly far future, and that they had the ability to time-travel. They came back to help advance the human race but had caused chaos.

"How?"

"We will show you," they said.

The room around Tamik and the Beings started spinning, and then the general and his soldiers disappeared as the spinning slowed. Tamik realized they were in the same cave, only this cave looked much less ancient.

"Have we time travelled?" Tamik asked the Beings.

"Yes, we have. Now, let us take you to the surface so you can see for yourself."

The Beings teleported with Tamik to the surface of the planet, and Tamik looked around. It was a smaller, much more primitive city in comparison to its future version. Tamik observed that this past version was also in war, with wounded people all over and laser beams being fired in the sky.

"You've brought me to the first war?"

"Look again," the Beings said.

Tamik looked up at the sky and saw a planet up in the distance.

"Wait, how is that possible, that would mean..."

"It's one war. There is no other planet. The future version of this world is fighting it's past."

Tamik's head was hurting just thinking of the paradoxes of the war.

"How did this happen?"

"Alas it is our fault. When we gave you humans access to worlds across the universe, we

were not able to put you on the same timeline. For most, it's an hour or even a couple of days difference, but because of this planet's close proximity to Tualias Mundi, it ended up being a couple hundred years. In fact, as we speak on this planet's timeline, another version of you could be out there. Maybe it's you as a child growing up, or it could be you on your deathbed."

Tamik paused to take this all in.

"So, what do you need me to do about it?"

"We have the means to communicate to both worlds, but they do not know our language. We need you to tell both worlds what is going on and to cease fire."

"Is there any catch?"

"It would be painful for your human body and could damage your mind."

Tamik thought about it. He didn't want to endure the pain, but he knew he was the only one able to stop this war and prevent a massive paradox. He also thought of what would make Lyla proud.

The Beings surrounded Tamik and so did a swirling energy. He saw everything. All of time and space at once. He keyed into the two versions of the worlds he wanted to communicate with. He could feel the pain in both his body and mind rising. He focused with everything he had so he could deliver the message, his voice being projected to every able ear on each world. Once the information had been passed on, he began to lose it. Neither his body nor his mind could take it any longer, so he let out a scream, the name of the only person he wanted to be with at that moment.

"Lylaaaaaa,"

And then he was gone.



Tamik woke up in a bed. His body felt completely fine, and he was in white robes. He looked around at the room he was in. It was somehow familiar. Then through the door came someone else.

"Hello there, young one."

Tamik looked in disbelief. "It's you! Where are we?"

"Take a guess."

"No way... we made it?"

"Indeed. I have been here for many years actually. I passed on to being here permanently a while ago."

"You mean... You're dead?"

"Well my body is, yes, but are you not talking to me now?"



Tamik smiled.

“So I assume things make sense to you now.”

Tamik looked down and began to put things together. “You’re from the world I saved!” The old man nodded, smiling. “I was just a kid when you did it, saved us from that horrid war. I heard your voice from the heavens.”

“So you and the Beings set up my bus going to the wrong world then, right?”

“Aren’t you glad we did? Do not forget even God’s interference with the gravitational anomaly omens.”

What the old man said reminded Tamik of his loved one. “How do I get back to Lyla?”

“Who says you aren’t already there?”

Everything around Tamik, including the old man, began to slowly fade away.

“It’s been quite an honor, Tamik, until we meet again... Oh and by the way, my name is...” The old man completely faded away before he could finish his sentence.



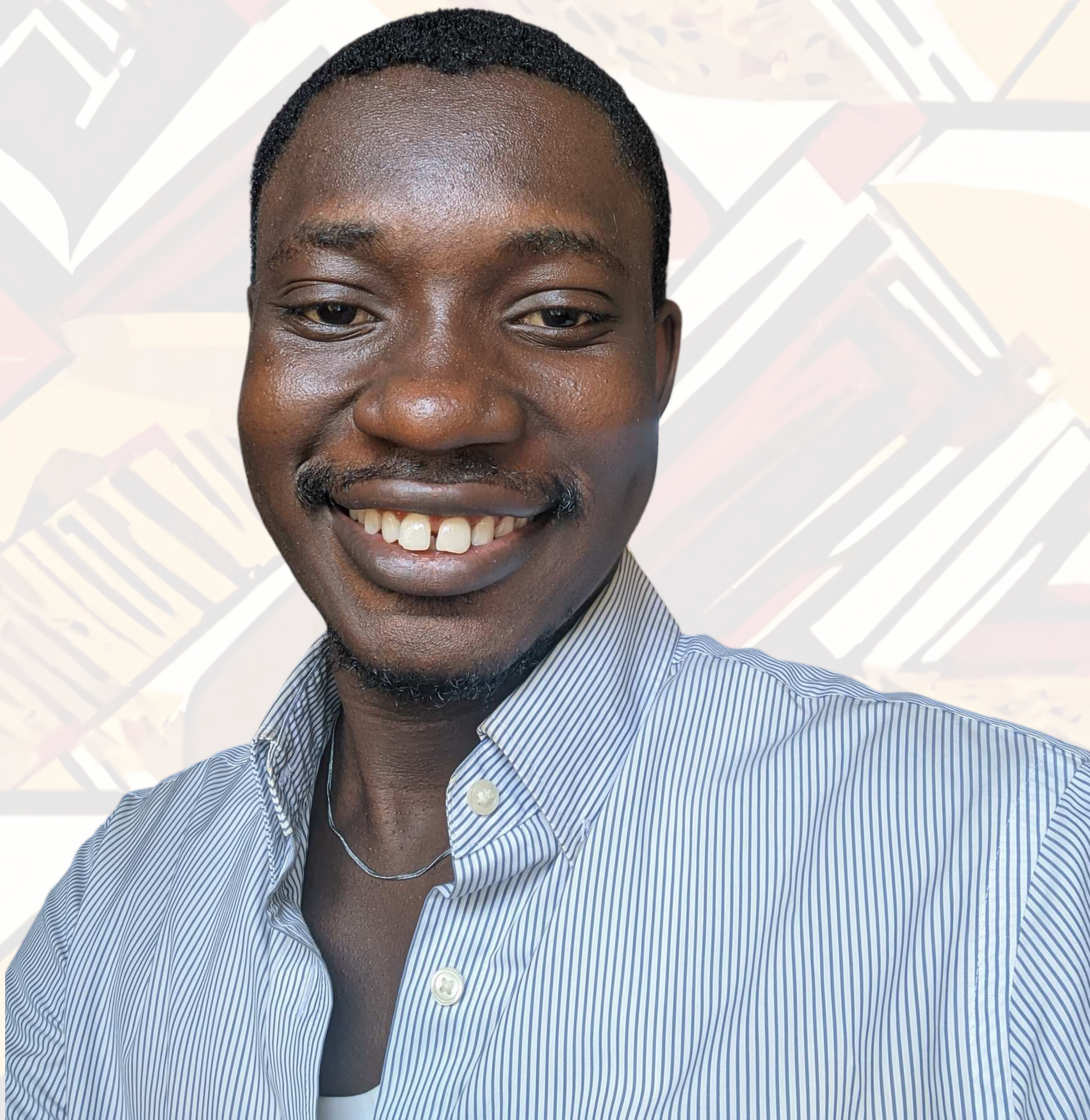
Tamik again awoke. He sat upright and looked around. He realized he was on that purple desert world he landed on all that time ago, huddled in that same corner where he was once preparing for a cold unmerciful night. His heart jumped and his eyes lit up. If he was back here, it could only mean...

“Tamik!”

The two ran to each other and thanked God for allowing them to be together again. They grew older together over the next years and their love was strong.

Eventually, they moved to the planet with the beautiful floating islands that Tamik loved so much, so they could settle down in the peace of the sky and start a family. Tamik always laughed, saying that if it wasn’t for the war that went beyond time, he would still be spiritually lost and alone. He thanked God, for everything happens for a reason.

Olaleye Olorunfemi



Olaleye Olorunfemi, also known as Femi Leye, is a Nigerian writer, cinephile and budding silicate technologist. He publishes short stories, personal essays and poetry on his medium page at <http://medium.com/@femileye12>. You can follow him on X [@leyezaiseph](https://twitter.com/leyezaiseph).

A Kiss of Demise

It is Thursday, a day that comes with its strange tidings. I begin to wonder what the morning sun has in store for me. However, none of that matters, except for the wind on my face. Even as I dream, I hear her call; it is a call that sends serenity down my spine. But how did that call come to be?

Tunike waits for me. She hopes I become ‘one’ with her. But she fails to hear the silent drumming of my heart. My heart only beats with recognition when I ride the winds of the roads.

“Why does it have to be this way?” Tunike asks, with a pleading tone.

“I will tell you how it came to be. My Egbon once spoke a tale to me. It was a quirky tale because its beginning and end seemed vague. Almost as if it never was real, but I paid heed to it.

He called it the Kiss of Death. My Egbon believed you gave Death a kiss, each time you got on your okada. So, my Egbon told of his intimate love with Death. He believed his first Kiss with the alluring being was in his fourth year as an okada-man (a rudimentary term for a motorcycle driver). Now, hear his story in his own words.”

On the fifth of October, I turned 38. I rode down Olabisi Way. I rode the winds with much gentleness, for speeding on these Nigerian roads is an early nod towards death’s call.

I was stopped by a woman who had her face covered with a grey veil. I made a quick hunch that she was a religious woman, but I made no comment towards her appearance.

“Where you dey go?” I asked in our beloved pidgin. I rarely spoke English during my rides, lest my passengers think I am an educated man, who couldn’t make a name of himself.

The woman refused to speak but she moved to mount my motorcycle. I turned towards the road and as she sat next to me, I felt a gentle pull at my presence of self.

“Madam, where you dey go?” I asked again, expecting a reply this time. For me, the second time has always been the charm.

She laughed and spoke this time. “Oga, dey go. When we reach, I go tell you.”

I started my motorcycle and rode once again at a gentle space. We rode in silence in the few minutes that followed--with nothing but the winds paying us heed. Suddenly, the woman stiffened and spoke.

“Oga, you no dey go fast. I don late, do fast abeg.”

I laughed and replied without thinking much about it. Passengers who wanted a speedy trip always had a fear of time, despite its abundance. So, I replied her request.

“Madam, I no won die. The road no good and I fit jam motor.”

“No worry, I dey hold you.” Were the words I heard last.



Without notice, I began to speed up. We passed through multiple vehicles and other okadas in a flash. The world seemed blurry to me and I could only hear my heart and the engine of my motorcycle.

My passenger took hold of my hands and whispered these words to my ears gently: “One dallies with the wind and death comes for her kiss. I have come for my kiss today and you will touch my lips in reverence.”

The world came back to life after I heard those words. I found myself slowing down, and I knew she no longer rode with me. But I never forgot her pull at my soul. From then onwards, I rode my okada, with a longing for her kiss.

Tunike’s eyes were wide as I finished telling my Egbon’s story. I felt satisfied because I had answered her question on why I kept riding my motorcycle. I too, pined for Death’s kiss.

Tunike closed her eyes and grabbed her hands. She placed them to her heart and asked me to feel the drumming of her heart.

“I hear your heart,” I whispered to her and pulled her close. “It envelopes me in its warmth, and perhaps, I could die here, knowing that I came close to completion.”

“What does it tell you?” Tunike asked.

“It sings. It sings a lonely song yearning for its completion.” I answered.

She embraced me after I answered her, and she began to weep. She wept to put the rains of the half-year to shame. I became afraid. I wanted to stay with her—to help her complete her song.

But I was promised a kiss and my soul yearned for those lips.

“My song has found its completion. You complete my song. Please, stay and hear its melody.” I pulled away from her embrace, and I ran from the world. I ran away from warmth. I ran away from solace, into a hollow end.

The wind welcomes me as I ride my uncle’s okada, now my motorcycle. It was passed down to me after he embraced the warmth of Death’s kiss.

There is freedom to be found in the winds of the road. There is also a chilling tranquility in the arms of Death, as her veil touches my back ever so slightly. I want to fall into the lure of her lips. Egbon said he found meaning in her moist tongue, and I envy him for his luck. I too, will taste the freedom of Death’s lips.

Aishat Adesanya



Aishat Adesanya is a 20-year-old Yoruba hijabi who started drawing at the age of nine years. She later discovered her love for writing and published her first story at age 17. She is an avid reader and aspires to use her art and unique African culture to make a positive impact on the world. Her writing has been featured in *Hearth Magazine* and *Schuylkill Valley Journal* and is forthcoming in Witsprouts' *Love Grows Stronger in Death* anthology.

The Oddity

Who sleeps at night and lets out moans instead of snores, waking up with a soaked pantie as though I had romped with a man all night? That's me. I moved to the UK from Nigeria three months ago, and this started two months into that, in a place where I have no one to talk to about it, leaving me constantly consumed with paranoia that took up permanent residence in my psyche. In my job, I take care of mentally challenged people. I see the stigmatisation. I administer their medication. I do not wish any of it on myself, so I dare not bring my problem up with my GP. The Internet offered little help at first, but soon I stumbled on Nairaland and found a deluge of stories that were exactly like mine. They call it ọkọ ọrun or 'spirit husband'.

So in those early hours of last week Thursday, when I drove a pocket knife I had hidden under my pillow into the side of my assailant, for me I had finally slain my ọkọ ọrun. But here, the lady investigator sitting across from me says that I have actually killed a Martin King, a white British father, with three children and a 'wife', and that I'm schizophrenic—as in mad. The more I try to tell her that what I killed is not even human, that it was my spiritual husband whom I was defending myself from, the more she repeats that I have schizophrenia and need a mental health assessment.

'... So that we can prove to the judge that you did not purposely kill that innocent man, who happens to be your husband who you have been married to for ten years now with three kids, which you keep denying, and instead saying that this man is some spiritual husband of yours, conjured by some witchcraft nonsense. We believe all these are as a result of your schizophrenia, and we want to help you get better. Do you understand, Oumo?'

I hold her gaze, wondering how a black woman like her has become so white that even her tongue is bleached with one of the thickest British accent I've ever heard.

'You ran away from your home two years ago, and your husband found you after these two years, tried to get you to come home and remember him, but instead, you killed him, your husband. Do you understand that?'

My scalp starts to itch, so I place my handcuffed hands on the table, lean my head down, and give it a good scratch. Raising my head again, I let out a long sigh. 'I won't lie to you, ma'am, I did not hear half of what you just said, to be honest. My apologies.' I finish with a wide smile.

'For fuck's sake, Oumo!' She says with a long sigh, pinching her nose bridge. She adjusts her beige turtleneck sweater, sits upright, and gives me the *stop fucking with me* look. She raises an eyebrow, 'You need to cooperate with us, answer our questions rightfully and truthfully, and drop all this spiritual husband nonsense. Tell us where you have been for two years now. We know you are mentally ill, but we need you to answer our questions so we can help you. Unless you want to rot in a jail, or worse, in a hardcore psychiatric home, in a straitjacket if you keep shouting and not agreeing to talk. You need to plead guilty, and you will get the help you need. After all, it was self-defence, right? That's the only way we can be able to get you into a very good care institution that will help you heal. Do you understand me?'

'I am telling you my truth, ma'am,' I wear a straight face. 'I did not kill an innocent man, who you all keep fucking saying is my husband or whatever. I killed my spiritual husband conjured by witchcraft. That dead body is just a decoy. He is doing all this so I can suffer for not accepting him. I'm new in this country. I did not run away from any home for two years now, madam. What other truth do you want me to say, ehn? You want me to happily accept



that I am mad when I am not? I am having a conversation with you. Would a mad person be able to do that? You lots are imposing a reality that I know nothing of and want me to just accept that. How, please?!' My voice was loud and harsh, heavy with frustration.

The lady leaned forward and held my gaze, placing her clasped palms before her. 'You stabbed your husband twenty times. You removed his two eyeballs, cut out his stomach and mutilated his throat... I can't even continue You have committed such a horrific act. Do you think this is a fucking joke?'

I sigh. This must confuse anyone, I know. But, you see, these people don't understand spirituality, juju, or witchcraft. They will just attribute everything to mental illness, but I know I am very okay. They keep saying this man I killed is my husband. Husband ke? I've told them more times than I can count he's not my husband and I have never met him in my life. I have explained how this ọkọ ọrun thing works. Mine came in forms, sometimes human, other times in forms even the wildest nightmares could not boast of. He believed we were married in the spiritual world, and so he would come to *claim me* and all sorts of rubbish. I even told them about my mother and how she used to jump from one juju place to the other, showing that as a possible avenue where this calamitous fate had befallen me. But did they believe me? No, they will rather believe what the ọkọ ọrun wants them to, that the body he came in this time was my husband and all the rubbish they've trying to make me accept and admit. I mean, how can anyone be married for three years with three children without knowing, especially in a place where they've only spent three months? They say I ran away, and they've been looking for me for two years. Is it me that is crazy or them?

Well, it's not them I blame. I have read so much about spiritual husbands on Nairaland, but I doubt there's any as creative as mine. How genius a stroke for him to only show up when I set foot into this white man's land, knowing I would not get any kind of spiritual intervention here. Now look at my life, at the kind of welcome pack I have been dealt in a strange country. All in the quest for a better life, I sold off everything I've ever worked for and brought my two legs here. Shouldn't I have jejely stayed back home in Naija? Is being overworked and underpaid not much better than being labelled a mad woman?

Anyway. If they won't listen to me, perhaps you might. Let me tell you how it all started, so you can see that I am not mad, and these people are just hypnotised or something.



'Is there an Oumouloula Aideini—?'

'Omolola Adeniyi, present!' I stood up to interrupt the tall, tanned man before he massacred what was left of my name. It was never hard for them to call all these tongue-twisting French or Russian names of popular people, but our African own, despite their straightforward spellings, were always a problem. I followed the man to a small room with a 'Meeting Room' sign on the door. He opened the door, entered, and beckoned for me to do the same. I entered to see a white lady with long, burgundy-colored hair seated. A blank lanyard circled her neck, holding her ID card in place against her burgundy turtleneck sweater, but I didn't have time to make out the name before her tanned partner sat next to her and dropped his folders on the table, making a loud bang. With my attention called back to him, he gestured for me to take a seat opposite them.

'So, Ms. Ou—' It was the lady.

'O-m-o-l-o-l-a,' I corrected with a smile.

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'Oumololaa... ah, I see! My apologies. I gotta tune that accent a bit, innit, hahaha!'

Her laugh showed little effort to hide its exaggeration, soon infecting her colleague whose laugh was even faker than hers. Not knowing how to respond, I looked at them with an unsure smile, then I looked down and adjusted in my chair. One thing I had learned since getting to the UK was that your cheeks would burn a lot of fat from the number of facial contortions you had to feign most times, simply because, half the time, you couldn't understand what they were saying or laughing about.

'Anyways,' the lady continued. 'My name is Elise. I am the Director of People, and this is my colleague, Martin. He is my Human Resource assistant.'

I smiled at her, then turned to him so he could take his own share of it, too. 'Nice to meet you both,' I said.

'Same here,' Martin replied, his eyes wearing a glint as bright as his reddened skin.

'So,' it was Elise again. 'You have applied for the role of a support worker on a full-time, 35-hour weekly contract. Is that right?'

I nodded in agreement.

'Okay, great, great. So I'm just going to run you through a few details about what the role entails, the kind of people you will be dealing with, your duties, what and what you cannot do till you have your training, and so on, basically. Good?' She asked with a thumbs up and a raised eyebrow.

'Yes, please, go on.' I said, gesturing with my hand.

'Okay, great! So you will be working in a residential setting. The one we picked for you is close to your address. I personally checked. It's like twenty minutes by bus, eight by car, yeah?'

I nodded.

'So this home has three service users, and you will be dealing with challenging behaviors of different sorts. Further details on challenging behaviors are in the book given to you earlier. These won't happen every time; they might probably never happen, but there's possibility of being attacked, kicked, slapped, smacked, bitten, scratched, and various other sorts, as well as situations of smearing of feces and feces being thrown at you. Sometimes you might experience the service user even eating their feces, and/or forcing themselves to urinate and drinking it, being spat at, umm...'

She gave a short pause as she opened her files, flipping through before continuing to explain behaviors I would experience on the job. Her accent was thick, which made her speech seem jumbled up. I eventually zoned out for a bit, thinking about my life and what the need to japa from Nigeria had led me to. I didn't exactly have it great back home, but I did have a good job as a bank manager. My salary wasn't all that, especially compared to the rate I would be earning here, but at least it was prestigious. I always heard about how whatever qualifications you had went out of the window when you enter the UK, and how one would have to start with care or support work. I thought people were just exaggerating. Apparently not. Nevertheless, I was still grateful for the opportunity. At least I'd be earning much more than I did as a bank manager back home, just that it would involve other people's feces. The thought made me want to throw up.



'...some of these people have learning disabilities, which leads them to exhibit challenging behaviors due to not being able to communicate well. They can become frustrated from all these, which is why we are there to support and help them. Like I said, these behaviors are not an everyday situation. Some come more often than others, and some others not at all. They have their care plans, which you'll go through when you resume to be able to read their risk assessments, triggers, how to control them, and all of that sort. You just need to understand that no two days can be the same in support work, yeah?'

I nodded.

'Yeah!' Elise finished with two thumbs up.

Martin passed on a pen and a bulk of papers to me. 'Just to get an idea of your understanding of some of the concepts in the healthcare system, you'll answer in your understanding these questions. No pressure. Just answer with what you think they mean, and we will score you afterwards. We will help you in any places where you didn't enter the right answer. This is just to understand how much you know and help you build on that. No pressure, haha,' he laughed a bit. 'So you just get on with it. We will step out to let you do your work and we will be back in a jiffy, yeah?'

'Yes, got it.' I said with a smile, nodding.

They both got up and left the room. I scanned through the questions and saw that I had a pretty good idea of them. A few minutes later, I was done. Elise and Martin came back. They said I did well in answering the questions, but they went through some more details on them. By the end of the session, all I could think of were responsibilities I wasn't sure I wanted, tied to a pay way more than I earned back home.



I kept playing back the interview in my mind as I held my phone before me, consulting Google Maps in search of the bus stop where I was to take my bus home. *Lowery Road*, the map said. The bus stop was right at a bend. The bus was arriving in one minute, according to the map. *Lucky me!* I was barely settled under the shelter when a double-decker bus came hurtling along on the opposite lane. I consulted the map again as it whisked past. *Oh, damn!* I was on the wrong side again!

This had been one of the hardest things for me since arriving in this country. Even with Google Maps, it was always confusing and stressful. My commonest mistake was identifying what side of the road to stand on, as there were always two posts opposite each other at every bus stop. There was also the possibility of a bus not showing up, scattering all plans and making me panic so much that even if it passed by, I would become partially blind or too tensed up to stop it. Let's not get into how I'd sprint to catch a bus that arrived at the stop before the due time, or how many times a bus would pass me by while I was looking for the stop to catch it.

Thankfully, I was going home this time, so I could just cross over to the other side of the road and wait for the next one without panicking too much. It took thirty minutes, but the next bus soon showed up and I was on my way. Buildings, cars, and people rushed past in the window, but all I could think of was the interview, the gift and the curse of it with the pay and the responsibilities I had to take to get the pay. I had so many bills piled up. I needed to start making money immediately, or else I would be out on the streets. The interviewers had

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said they would let me know how I did in a couple of days. If I was successful, I'd start my induction immediately.

My phone started to ring, jolting me from my thoughts. The bus stopped to pick up passengers and I realized I had gotten to my bus stop. Thank God for the phone call. That's how I would have found myself another mile from home before realizing it. I didn't recognize the phone number, but I picked the call anyway as I alighted from the bus.

'Hello.'

'Hiyya. Is this Oumoulolaa Aydeneyi?' A lady asked through the phone.

I roll my eyes. 'Yes, this is she.'

'Oh, great. This is Rach from QualiCare. I just wanted to inform you that you passed the interview, and we can now go on with the next steps of your employment.'



Okay, this should be it. Number 12, Phillips Road.

I heaved, breathless and exhausted from the hill I had to climb to my destination. I rang the bell, and after a few minutes, a short, chubby lady with pale skin opened the door. She was probably the whitest white person I had ever seen, almost as though she had no blood running within. She was wearing a fleece jacket with the company's name tag on it. She had her brunette hair tied up in a bun, and she looked clean. She gave me a wide smile and gestured for me to come in.

'Hiyya, you must be Oumo... sorry, I can't pronounce it. I'm not good with names.' she said.

'Haha, that's fine. Just call me Omo,' I replied as I pushed past her into the building.

'Oumo. Okay, that's fine. I will get it with time, don't worry, haha,' she said with an exaggerated laugh.

I broadened my smile to reciprocate.

'Anyway, welcome to Phillips Road, and my name is Caitlyn. I am the manager of this home. I'm sure the office already told you this is a residential home: two males and a female. It's a pretty calm environment, don't worry. I know it's your first experience in the UK and all.'

I was straining my ear as she had quite a thick accent, but I was able to grasp what she said seconds after she finished a sentence.

'I will take you around now, show you the service users' rooms, the main lounge, laundry room, kitchen, patio, medication room, da da da, and yeah...' she gestured around the area and turned to me with a smile and two thumbs up.

I smiled back and gave her a thumbs-up in return.

'Alrighty, let's go then.' She said as we made our way into the front lounge, which was a few steps from the entrance. 'The service users went out for a drink, but they should be back in a moment. After the tour, I will get you started on their care plans, and we will move from there.'



Many minutes later, the tour was over, and I was seated in the main lounge with a cup of tea, reading through one of the service user's care plan folder when I heard the doorbell. Caitlyn was upstairs, so I got up to unlock the door. Standing upfront was a white lady with blonde hair, who I recognized to be one of the service users from the pictures I had been shown. She had glasses on with her hair let down, strands flying everywhere. She had a pink puffer coat on, black leggings, and a cast on one leg with boots on.

'Hello,' I said to the lady as she entered the house and removed her coat.

She simply nodded, muttered, 'You alright,' and went to the main lounge.

'That's Zoe. She doesn't talk to anyone.'

I turned around to see a petite black lady standing by the door. She had long braids, the same kind of fleece jacket Caitlyn had on, and her ID badge around her neck. She stretched her hand for a shake, and I took it.

'You must be the new staff. Welcome. My name is Grace, also a staff here,' she said.

'It's nice to meet you, Grace,' I smiled back at her.

'Same here. As she made her way into the lounge, she added, 'The others are coming. Just wait here, so you can meet them, yeah?'

A moment later, a chubby man came into view, escorted by a young lady who was holding a clear bag filled with cutlery. She had the same fleece jacket on. I saw her trying to coax the man to walk to the property, but instead, he was shouting, moaning, and stomping his feet, refusing to move further. He was the service user whose care plan I'd been reading when the doorbell tolled. The lady was still coaxing him when another male staff joined, trying to assist the situation. While that was happening, a tall white male was walking towards the entrance, staff fleece on. He stopped for a bit to wait for someone or something. It was at this point that I saw a figure and was suddenly overcome by this strong feeling of déjà vu, so strong that my legs felt faint, and I had to hold on tight to the wall I was standing by.

Everything around this figure faded away. It was as though I was seeing him through two different eyes in two different realities. In this present reality, he was a magnificent man, with the features of a human although he looked too perfect to be one. I felt myself being happy and drawn to him. The urge to go to him was strong, but I managed to control myself. I broke my eyes off him, and all the beauty in and around him immediately collapsed. From the side of my eyes, he was the same figure I had seen earlier, but this time, he had a grotesque appearance—a normal body on the upper half, but a long horn on his head. I looked down, and the other half of him was that of a goat. It was a satyr. These two creatures in one, evoking opposite emotions in me, all in a matter of seconds. As they approached, everything became stronger, excitement and animated fear. And closer they came with their hands stretched. My heart was beating fast, and I felt like I was about to have a panic attack. I wanted to say something, to shout, but it was as though I had swallowed my tongue.

'Oi, move out of the way man!'

'Wha—' my voice was raspy.

They were now standing right in front of me, saying something that I couldn't hear, and my vision was starting to blur out.

‘Hey, hey!’

Someone was shouting and shaking me. It was only then that I snapped out of my trance. My legs gave out as I went down on my knees. I turned around to see Grace, looking worried. I looked to my front slowly, scared of seeing them again, but instead, I saw the three staff from earlier, as well as the chubby man who had now calmed down and was just looking at me. Right in front of me, was a short white man with a hunched back who I recognized to be the last service user, wearing a face cap and a winter jacket. He looked at me, confused, stretching out his hand to help me up, as another male staff hurried to join him.

‘You alright, mate?’ The short man asked.

I nodded, dusting off my clothes, trying to get my composure back. ‘Yes, I’m fine, thank you. I think I’m just a bit dehydrated and tired. I’m fine.’

I’m not sure if anyone believed my explanation, but we all made our way inside the home.

That was a month ago. It was the first time he appeared to me, and it has been hell since then. I would see this man, sometimes as a human or satyr, everywhere I went. Whatever form he took, I always recognized him. I had nightmares about him from the stroke of midnight every Thursday. On the bus home, most times, he would suddenly appear to be sitting next to me, sometimes even trying to touch me. Whenever I reacted and shouted at him, he would disappear. The problem was, I was the only one who could see him, so, of course, I would seem like a mad person to the people around. It was while I was looking everywhere for answers that I stumbled on Nairaland and the many similar tales there.

One time, I finished grocery shopping, and on coming out of the store, he was just outside there, standing, waiting for me. I acted as though I didn't see him, and started walking in the opposite direction, only for him to start calling out to me.

‘Omo. Omo, wait up. You have to stop running away from me,’ he shouted.

The way I was brisk-walking and looking over my shoulders, I knew I would seem like a mad woman to anyone looking.

‘Just wait. I love you, Omo. Come back home. I miss you. Your children miss you. Stop running away, please!’ The man said to me, chasing up and almost on to me. He did everything to sound human—a very deluded human—and he even created some kids we have together in his head.

Just wow!

At a parking lot where I couldn’t see anyone, I stopped and turned around to face him, wearing my fear and irritation on my face. ‘Stop following me, demon, stop acting human, or like we have this past life together. I am a child of God, and I bind and cast you. Go back to whoever sent you and leave me alone, demon! If you come close to me with that fake body of yours, eh, I will kill you! I’m not scared of you o!’

He just stood there as I threatened pointedly at him in the parking lot, not moving further to follow me, wearing a look of bewilderment on his borrowed human face.

I rolled my eyes and turned, hoping that he didn’t see beyond my claim at the potent fear that was roiling within me. ‘Fake! Evil spirit’ I muttered to myself, looking around to see if he



heard, only to find a dozen people looking at me. This business of appearing mad to strangers had happened too many times that it didn't bother me much anymore anyway. He must have been there among the people, but I made my way to the bus stop and didn't look back again.

He continued showing up everywhere, every day. My manager had begun to complain. My colleagues were getting worried too, warning me to try and sort out my problem before it got me into trouble. I contemplated reaching out to my family—especially my mom, so she could tell her people to back off me if this was her doing—to find a solution for this. But for some reason, I killed the idea in my head.

I was here by myself. People back in Nigeria could do little to help me here. And since God was not answering my prayer, perhaps it was up to me to destroy this thing and get my life back together. So I planned. He showed himself to me every day, but he only came into my room on Thursday mornings. No matter how hard I tried not to sleep, I always end up dosing off. And in my dreams, he would be there, touching my body, doing things to me, but by the time I woke up, I could tell that he had been there physically.

I made sure to pick up some sexy lingerie from Victoria's Secret. I had a bath and adorned myself with a sensual fragrance. Then I sat down and did a marathon of coffee drinking from 7:00 pm until around 11:00 pm. Staring out of the window, everywhere was dead quiet, with cars parked left and right. There were only cats roaming around, and the occasional bus tearing into the night's stillness. At the stroke of midnight, I pulled down the blinds, climbed into bed, and waited.

The coffee disappointed itself because the next thing I knew, I was lying on clouds and this man was there, talking to me.

'You smell so good. You look even better. Seems like you're finally letting me in. I never knew this day would come.' The face he had on wore a childish grin.

'Well, I've missed you since last Thursday,' I smiled.

'But we've seen every day since then and you didn't say,' he raised a brow.

'That's because it's only this I miss. I don't like it when you make me look mad in front of people.'

He moved closer until our bodies touched. He was wearing a sincere look. 'I'm sorry I couldn't help that. We have been searching for two years now. We've been worried sick; the kids, your dad, and siblings, everyone. It was the new job you applied for that informed the police when your description matched the images we sent out. I came down to see you myself, but you kept acting like you didn't know me. But that's fine, okay? I don't want to think about that. We can have that discussion later, but first, we're here now, and I've really missed you too.'

I was confused, so I shrugged off his last sentence and said, 'But how did it take you that long to find me?'

'Babe, you've completely changed everything. I mean, how did you go from being a white woman to being black? That nearly fooled me. And now you have a new house, a new job, a new identity. You didn't even take any of your documents with you. But well, you're still Omolola.'

I stared at him as he blabbed away, until I couldn't hold it anymore and suddenly busted out laughing. 'Wow, wow, wow! What a performance!' I clapped. 'Ah ahn. I have read many tales of people having ọkọ ọrun, but I must say you are one of a kind; a Gen Z spiritual husband.'

He pulled away and held my gaze, his mouth agape.

'But that's enough now,' I say, wiping a fake tear from my eye. 'I have seen your true form, remember? Your horns and goat legs. Stop acting nice and creating this reality in your head like we had some life together. You're not even human. If you want to kill me, take me away, or whatever. Just stop pretending already.'

He huffed and growled.

'I. Am. Not. Scared. Of. You.' That was probably the first time ever that I meant that, and it felt good. Yet, a part of me wondered why I wasn't scared of this creature when he was so close and could kill me on the spot.

'Omo, stop this now,' he shouted. 'What is this fucked up shit you are saying? Do you think this is a joke?'

'Okay, I'm sorry,' I found myself saying. 'Can I get a hug?'

Confusion slipped onto his face, but it slipped off again just as quickly. Then he wore a grin, 'Oh, you'll get more than that.' His clothes disappeared, and the sexiest chiselled man stared back at me.

I couldn't understand how I suddenly became overwhelmed with wanton desire. I moaned as he came onto me, tracing an electric finger up my neck and finding my lips. Then the desire began to boil, and an easiness set in. This must be when I remembered why I was there, as I groped beneath the clouds I was laying on, finding the chilly coldness of the weapon I had hidden beneath my pillow. He lowered his body onto mine and was going to replace his fingers on my lips with his when I struck.

'Fuck! Wha—!' He grunted, a potent fear creeping into his eyes, spilling into and engulfing his face. He gasped and grunted as he pulled out my knife-gripping hand from where I had drilled into his side.

I woke up just then; must have been the warmth of the blood squirting all over me. He was there just as he had been in the dream, naked, weak and subdued. I doubt any warrior who ever conquered an enemy could have felt as victorious as I did, standing over the ọkọ ọrun that had tormented my life every single day for the last month. One stroke wasn't enough. I bent down and stabbed away.



So would you say I was evil? Or mad? That's up to you. Left to me, I was merely defending myself, in a country that does not understand how spiritual juju works. Can you believe that even after the whole ordeal, he's still been appearing to me, only he doesn't change faces anymore? He's now permanently wearing the one I killed him in, the one these people claim is lying in some mortuary. He comes covered in blood, with no eyes, and missing some fingers. It's a torment I'm fine with, because he can only appear, he can no longer feed me with stories that he has somehow placed in these people's heads—I made sure to remove that tongue. I know he's just giving me time to feel a little sense of victory, but very soon,



he'll take on another form and start his pursuit again. I don't want to think about that because I don't know where I would be, and whether I would be able to defend myself and dehumanize any form he takes on, like I did this one. Until one of us gets tired and gives up this silly act, I guess.

So why don't you tell me: do you think I am mad?

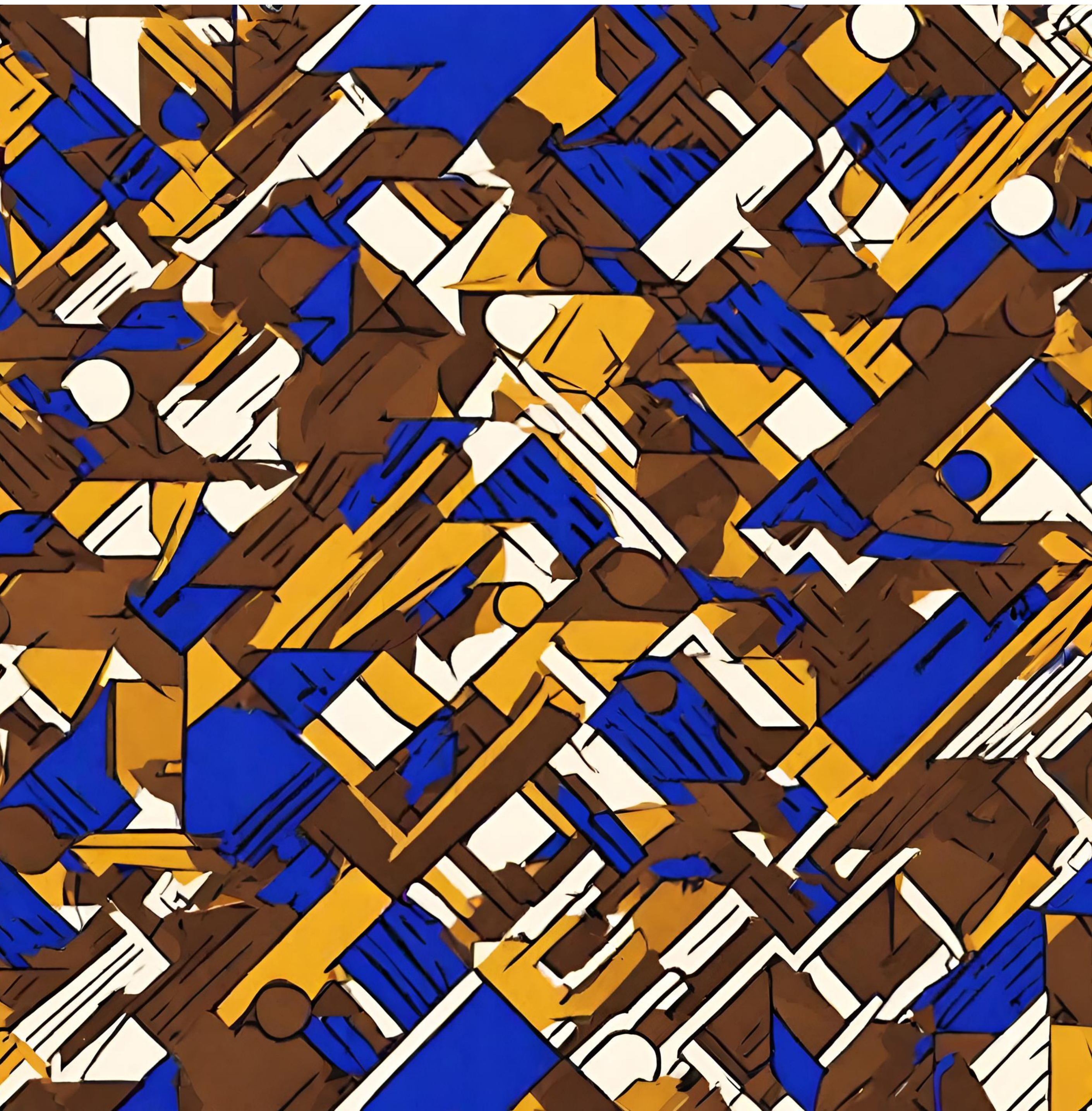
'Oumo,' the lady investigator asks. 'With all these explanations I have given you, will you plead guilty or not guilty?'

'Not guilty,' I bare my teeth at her.

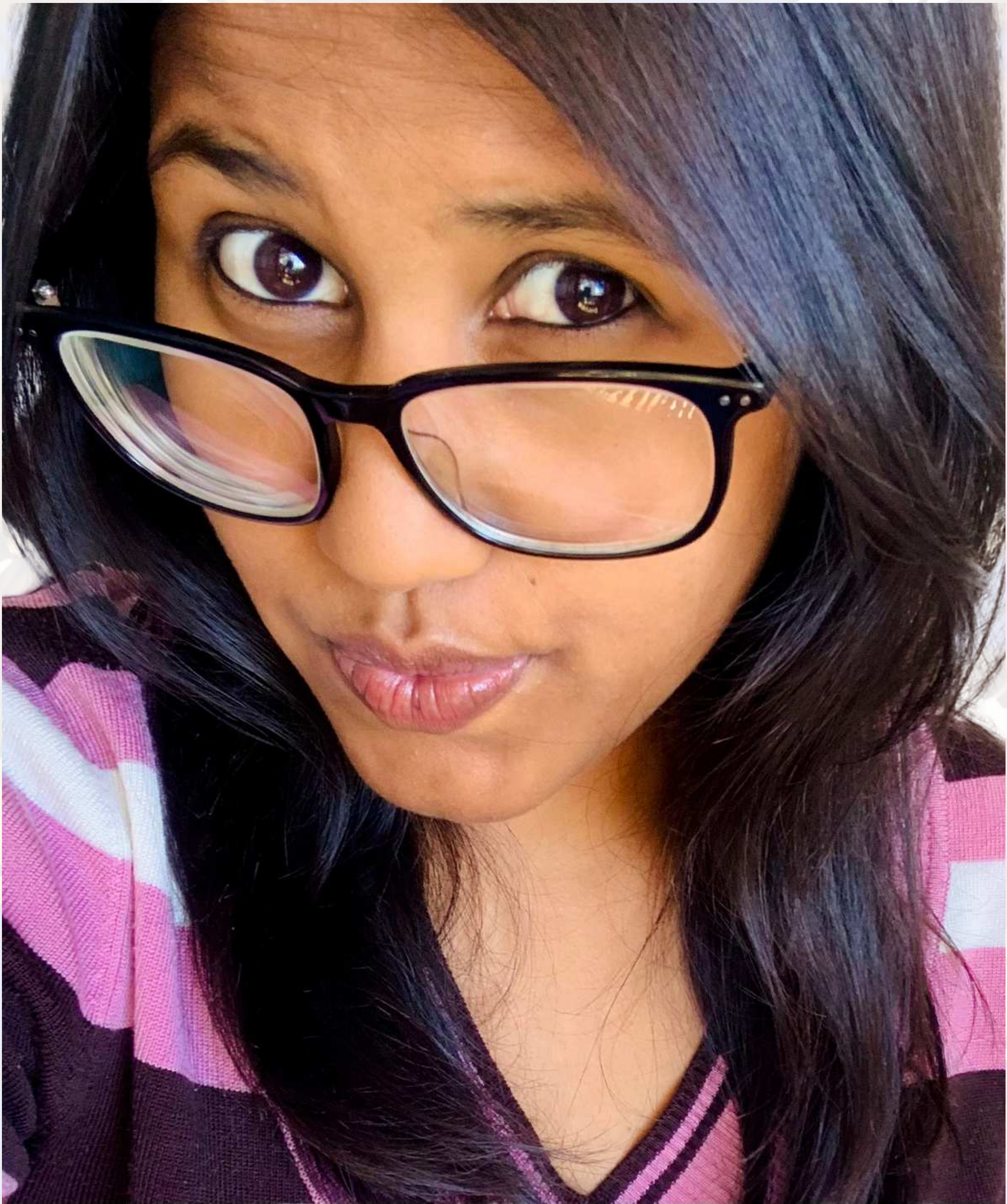


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ESSAYS



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Between and Betwixt: A Comparative Analysis of the Ontological Liminality of the Monstrous in Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* and Nnedi Okorafor's *What Sunny Saw In The Flames*

The concept of liminality was first introduced by Arnold van Gennep in 1960. Victor Turner, building on Gennep's concept, posits that the "attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (threshold people) are necessarily ambiguous" (1969: 360). This, he explains, is due to the elusive nature of liminal beings as a result of their (dis)location – being positioned "neither here nor there", but rather hanging "between and betwixt" classifications assigned culturally or ceremonially (Turner 1969: 360). Whilst Gennep and Turner sought to study liminality through an anthropological lens in order to comprehend and provide elucidation on the stages of ceremonial rites of passage, Jeffrey Cohen alludes to liminality within the literary psychoanalytical domain in "Monster Culture: Seven Theses". According to Cohen, the ontological liminality of monsters – namely, their "refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things'" and their resistance to being included "in any systematic structuration" – renders them "suspended between forms", thereby threatening to "smash distinctions" (1996: 6). I would argue that this liminality of monsters, particularly when encountered within the literary genres of horror and fantasy, lends to an uncanny experience for the reader as, whilst the inclusion of monsters in such texts is expected and, as such, familiar (heimlich), liminal characteristics contribute to a gross unfamiliarity which, in turn, can be termed uncanny. In his 1919 paper "The Uncanny", Sigmund Freud arrives at three explanations of the uncanny: the familiar being encountered in an unfamiliar setting, the unfamiliar being encountered in an otherwise familiar setting, and the repressed memories and societal taboos which ought to remain so being brought to light. Interestingly, liminal spaces are recognised as "space(s) in which the repressed returns" (Lundberg and Geerlings 2017: 1). It is due to the intersection between Cohen's Monster Theory and the Freudian concept of the uncanny that both these works will be employed as a lens for my analysis of the ontological liminality of the monstrous in Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* (2011 [1975]) and Nnedi Okorafor's *What Sunny Saw In The Flames* (2011). These novels are notably of two distinct genres. *'Salem's Lot* is classified as horror and, as such, Noël Carroll explains, is designed to elicit feelings of terror and trepidation (1987: 57). Conversely, *What Sunny Saw In The Flames* belongs to the realm of fantasy, a genre that is hinged on the broader thematic concern of a moral lesson being conveyed. Whilst the monstrous in each novel functions within the context of genre-specific conventions in an attempt to evoke different emotions, there are also various similarities between the vampires of King's novel and the Leopard People of Okorafor's, particularly when focusing on the inherent ontological liminality of these characters which, to reiterate, will be the focus of this study.

'Salem's Lot follows the story of a small town, Jerusalem's Lot, which falls prey to vampirism. Ben Mears, a novelist, returns to the town with the intention of gathering material for his next novel. Kurt Barlow and Richard Straker appear too, and soon inhabit the abandoned Marsten House. These new arrivals coincide with crimes such as disappearances of children and corpses, and murder. Ben is joined by a group of misfits, who realise the crimes have been committed by Barlow, the master vampire, and the civilians he has turned into vampires. The band of hunters attempt to attack Barlow at Marsten House, conflating the horror genre conventions of the haunted house and the vampire[1], and compounding the liminality of the vampires and the liminal spaces they inhabit. Despite the assumption that Barlow has been successfully annihilated, the novel ends with no confirmation that the rest of the vampires have been killed, and the assumption is that vampires continue to roam even the smallest of towns. Kevin McCarron claims that this refusal to "close" the narrative is "characteristic of much horror writing in general" (1995: 3). This comes as no surprise as, bearing in mind the intention of the horror genre (namely, to terrify), leaving the narrative

[1] As Dr Kevin McCarron suggests Caroline B. Crooney does in *The Cheerleader* (1991), *The Return of the Vampire* (1992) and *The Vampire's Promise* (1993).



open-ended elicits fear of the unknown, terrifying long after the novel has been read. More importantly, for the purpose of this study, the lack of closure at the end of the novel lends to further ambiguity and, as a result, the town as a whole remains a liminal space.

Eugenio Merino claims that “during the nineteenth century, English literature showed a particular interest in vampires” resulting in the “blood-sucker” becoming “the most familiar character of popular culture” (2005: 94). Margaret Carter explains that “supernatural entities falling under the general classification of ‘vampire’ include many varieties of blood-drinking demons, as well as the animated dead that prey on the living” (2007: 619). By combining these two definitions, it becomes clear that vampires are classified as non-human entities that prey on human blood and are neither entirely living nor entirely dead, but rather remain a liminal archetype for the atrocities of being caught in a limbo between the two absolute conditions. When Carroll claims that monsters in horror are “impure”, attributing impurity to a monster being “categorically contradictory”, he provides an example of such an impure being in the “interstitial” nature of “vampires” as simultaneously “living and dead” (1987: 55). This characteristic emerges repeatedly in King’s novel. Referred to repeatedly as the “Undead” (King 2011: 240, 337, 347, 387, 393, 399, 404, 412, 469), the vampires occupy a space on the very threshold of life and death – a liminal space. The prefix “un” of the term “Undead” implies that the vampires who were once in a state of being alive (a prerequisite to die), transitioned into a state of death but, due to their vampiric condition, were somehow able to undo or reverse the state – returning from the state of death but being unable to return entirely to the state of being alive. By entering into the discourse of the age-old debate regarding what – if anything – exists after death, we enter into unfamiliar and, resultantly, uncanny territory. The “un” prefix of the term “uncanny” has also come under analysis. Nicholas Royle explains that, “the ‘un’ unsettles”, among other things, “order and sense” (2003: 2). Thus, very existence of the vampires in *Salem’s Lot* unsettles the natural order of life and death, and perverts the possibility of anything existing after death as Freud claims that many people experience uncanniness of the highest degree in relation to death, dead bodies and the return of the dead – characteristics that lie at the crux of the representation of the vampire. Freud additionally claims that “the immortal soul” – which is what vampires initially appear to be due to their inability to remain dead – “was probably the first double of the body” (1919: 9). The vampire, thus, weaves together fears of death and contrasting fears and desires of remaining alive, thereby epitomising uncanniness. Additionally, it is the lack of human comprehension regarding this interstitial nature of the undead vampire that terrifies the reader, as it is human nature to fear that which cannot be comprehended. Cohen accounts for this, stating that “in the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble” (Cohen 1996: 7) and the inexplicable liminal existence of the vampire is relegated to the realm of the supernatural.

Liminality seeps into the very characterisation of the vampire. King describes the newly transitioned vampire, Danny Glick, through the eyes of another character, Mike Ryerson:

The eyes were open. Just as he had known they would be. Wide open and hardly glazed at all. They seemed to sparkle with hideous life in the last, dying light of day. There was no death pallor in that face; the cheeks seemed rosy, almost juicy with vitality. He tried to drag his eyes away from that glittering, frozen stare and was unable (2011: 161).

Whilst corpses are expected to have their eyes closed – with morticians even commonly gluing closed the eyes of the dead in order to force them closed – Mike expects Danny’s eyes to be open as he realises that Danny is not dead in the natural human sense. Interestingly, Danny’s eyes form the primary focus of Mike’s observation. In their essay “The eyes are the window to the uncanny valley”, Chelsea Schein and Kurt Gray claim that the horror genre “utilises alterations of the eyes” to evoke “uncanniness” as “there is something inherently creepy about abnormal eyes” (2015: 173). While Schein and Gray analyse ocular features of robots, I would suggest extending their analysis to that of vampires who can also be relegated to the interstitial realm of the neither living nor dead.

Robots with eyes, Schein and Gray conclude, violate a “fundamental expectation of the mind” and induce “uncanniness” (2015: 177). To reiterate then, Danny’s eyes being unnaturally “wide open” violates the fundamental expectation of the mind that the eyes of the dead ought to be closed and, as such, induces uncanniness. Forensic scientist John Murphy explains that the eye can be used to predict the time of death when performing an autopsy on a cadaver. According to Murphy, “about two hours after death, the cornea becomes hazy or clouding, turning progressively more opaque over the next day or two” (2004). The expectation is that Danny’s eyes ought to be completely opaque as he has been dead and even buried for many days. Danny’s eyes, however, are described as “hardly glazed at all”, suggesting that death in the natural sense has not overtaken his body. His eyes are, instead, described as “sparkling with hideous life”. Julia Kristeva writes that the very presence of the corpse, “seen outside of science, is the utmost of abjection” as it “disturbs identity, system [and] order”, positioning itself vicariously as “imaginary uncanniness and real threat” (1982: 4).

Following Kristeva’s claim, the adjective “hideous” is extremely poignant as it indicates Mike’s fear and disgust, his response of abjection and uncanniness, at his discovery of Danny’s state. Carroll opines that examples such as these “indicate that the character’s affective reaction to a monster is not merely a matter of fear” but, rather, “compounded by revulsion” (1987: 53). However, while horror has a “tendency” to associate monsters with “filth, decay and deterioration” (Carroll 1987: 53), King’s vampires create an uncanny experience as they deviate from historical representations of monsters of horror – rather than being filthy or decaying, they are described as beautiful. Danny, for instance, is described as boasting “no deathly pallor”. Rather, his cheeks are described as “rosy” – an adjective used to describe the rush of blood to one’s cheeks which is a sign of good health. This rosiness, however, should be absent due to “livor mortis (gravitational settling of the blood)” (Murphy 2004) of the corpse. His cheeks are also described as “almost juicy with vitality”, suggesting plumped skin which should not be so due to “rigor mortis (stiffening of the body)” (Murphy 2004). This indicates that Danny’s corpse still boasts characteristics of life despite having died, which results in an eerie, uncanny experience for the reader, drawing on Freud’s claim that “intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not” contributes to uncanniness (1919: 8). Further, Cohen claims that, “the monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” (1996: 4) and this becomes clear in Mike’s reaction to Danny’s corpse. Mike tries to “drag his eyes away from that glittering, frozen stare” but finds himself “unable” to do so. As aforementioned, Mike is both fearful of and repulsed by his discovery. However, it is clear that he is additionally drawn to Danny’s appearance. As such, repeated descriptions of Danny – or of vampires in general throughout the course of King’s novel – serve to upset the genre-specific convention that monsters should be disgusting, simultaneously contributing to uncanniness as the reader who finds themselves drawn to and desiring the monstrous creature attempts to repress these desires, assuming such attraction to be taboo.

It is important to note though, that Danny’s body is doubly uncanny because his transition into the liminal state of vampirism occurs during the (arguably) liminal phase of transitioning from childhood to adolescence. This trope is echoed in Okorafor’s *What Sunny Saw In The Flames*, a fantasy bildungsroman that follows the formulaic narrative pattern of a young adult protagonist being inducted into magic and embarking on a quest that only she can complete due to her lineage, of which she was previously unaware. Like Danny Glick, Sunny is characterised as transitioning through a liminal period – from childhood to adolescence – because she is only twelve years old. Furthermore, Sunny is considered an outcast in Nigerian society because she is albino. In some African cultures, albinism in itself is considered monstrous and the individual with albinism is stigmatised as being bewitched or directly involved in witchcraft. Okorafor plays on this stigma to transpose Sunny’s otherness within natural human society (referred to as “Lamb” society in the novel) to an otherness as a newcomer to the juju/Leopard People society. Thus, Sunny holds an “extimate” position in both societies being, both, “exterior” to and “an intimate part of” both societies, “a position that defies the inside/outside, self/other boundary” (Gadoin and Ramel 2013: 7). This “extimate” social position further emphasises her liminal existence.



Sunny is guided on her journey by her friends, Chichi, Orlu and Sasha – all of whom have always known their status as Leopard People. Chichi explains:

Every Leopard Person has two faces—a human face and a spirit face. I’ve always known my human and spirit face. When I was born, for the first week of my life, I wore my spirit face. My parents didn’t know what my human face looked like until my seventh day of life [...] Anyway, the spirit face is more you than your physical face, it stays with you, it doesn’t age, you can control it as it controls you (Okorafor 2011: 38-39).

Otto Rank’s concept of the *doppelgänger* which is explored by Freud as a cause of uncanniness comes to the fore in Chichi’s explanation. Each Leopard Person is inherently “double” as they possess two sides – both, physically and spiritually – and lead two lives. Chichi remarks that, upon birth, she entered the world wearing her “spirit face” and only after the first week did her “human face” appear. The norm for Leopard People then seems to be that their existence as Leopard People takes precedence, with their existence as humans forming a secondary element to their lives. More importantly, Chichi notes the power the spirit face – metonymically, the existence as a Leopard Person – has over a person claiming that “it controls you”. The narrative exists within the genre of fantasy and, as Tzvetan Todorov explains, the reader becomes aware of the “new laws of nature” (1975: 41) that permit the existence of two faces or even two entirely different elements of a person’s spiritual being. However, the reader remains in a state of hesitation as to whether the uncanny events being described in the narrative could be naturally explained or are the project and effect of supernatural forces. Nonetheless, as aforementioned, the uncanny event being alluded to in this case is the ability of the Leopard Person to undergo the processes of doubling, dividing and interchangeable identities, thereby extending oneself (Freud 1919), particularly at will, which renders them liminal beings as they are neither fully of this world nor entirely of the spiritual world. Rather, Leopard People exist on the threshold of the physical and spiritual plains, moving between plains at will whilst having a metaphorical foot firmly in each plain at any given time.

This intrinsic liminality leads to various other magical abilities: for example, Sunny is able to make herself invisible at will and pass through solid structures, such as doors (Okorafor 2011: 51-55, 84, 108). Invisibility, according to Turner, is also a characteristic of liminality (1969: 360). While King’s vampires are not able to turn invisible, they are similar to Okorafor’s Leopard People in that they are able to simply vanish. Marjorie Glick, for instance, is described as being able to “seep into the very pores of the wall, like smoke” (King 2011: 296). According to Cohen, “the monster’s body is both corporeal and incorporeal” and “its threat” lies in its very “propensity to shift” (1996: 5). As such, the liminal monstrosity of both the Leopard People and vampires, due to their ability to choose between corporeality and incorporeality comes to the fore, resulting in an uncanny experience for the reader.

Whilst there are various similarities between the vampires and Leopard People and both monsters evoke an uncanny experience and destabilise reality, I would suggest that the purpose of employing these monsters operates somewhat differently in each of the two genres. Whilst the monstrous in horror evokes simultaneous fear and revulsion, the monstrous in fantasy, despite evoking an uncanny response too, does not always elicit a negative reaction. This could, perhaps, be attributed to the fact that the vampires in *Salem’s Lot* are the antagonists while Sunny, in particular, as a Leopard Person in *What Sunny Saw In The Flames*, is a protagonist. However, I would argue that this is one of the greatest distinctions between the genres of horror and fantasy. While the monstrous can only ever be construed as possessing a propensity for evil in horror, the monstrous in fantasy is hinged on the moral choices made by individuals. Melissa Thomas explores this aspect of fantasy, noting that the “heroic cycles in fantasy are tailored to students” (2003: 60) as it seeks to teach a moral lesson. This is an appropriate approach to Okorafor’s fantasy *bildungsroman*. Thomas also claims that, in fantasy, “the hero always confronts and conquers evil”, which is a “metaphor” for young adults to learn from (2003: 60).

This can be traced to Sunny's battle against Black Hat Otokoto and Ekwensu. When Sunny discovers that Black Hat Otokoto had been mentored by her own maternal grandmother, she realises her monstrous potential for evil. However, by triumphing against Black Hat Otokoto and Ekwensu, Sunny redeems herself as good. One might suggest that Sunny's redemption arc allows her to overcome her monstrousness, but I would argue that it is the very reliance on her monstrousness that allows her to redeem herself. When finally encountering Ekwensu, Okorafor writes that, "on instinct, Sunny let her spirit face move forward ... Relaxing her shoulders and mind, Sunny let *Anyanwu*, her spirit, her chi, the name of her other self, guide her" (2011: 154). Sunny's first instinct is to allow her spirit face, the Leopard Person side of double personality, to step forward. Sunny does not simply accept or welcome her abilities as a Leopard Person, she relies on her abilities to rescue her and the rest of the world. Importantly, despite the anxiety she had felt when encountering Ekwensu whilst drawing on her nature as a human being, she feels calm and is able to relax her shoulders and her mind, trusting in her juju skill as a Leopard Person and allowing that side of her to guide her. What becomes clear, then, through the monstrous part of Sunny being in the metaphorical driving seat when she confronts and conquers evil, is that both sides of her double personality are in agreement and have chosen to be good. As such, it becomes apparent that the monstrous in fantasy operates to teach a lesson – that one can choose whether to be good or evil.

Horror, as previously stated, lies in complete contrast, as the inclination for evil is so great in monsters of the horror genre that it overtakes and consumes them. In *'Salem's Lot*, in particular, Carter observes that King employs the "traditional portrayal of the vampire as demonically evil" (2007: 628). This is highlighted when King describes a scene in which Danny Glick approaches his friend, Mark, requesting to be invited in. Danny's eyes are described as being "reddish and feral", his teeth are described as having "grown hideously long and sharp" and his ability to seemingly levitate is compared to being characteristic of "some dark insect" (King 2011: 267), echoing his transition from a human into an animalistic, predatory creature. Mark's reaction encapsulates the terror King seeks to evoke in the reader:

He got out of bed and almost fell down. It was only then that he realized fright was too mild a word for this. Even terror did not express what he felt. The pallid face outside the window tried to smile, but it had lain in darkness too long to remember precisely how. What Mark saw was a twitching grimace—a bloody mask of tragedy (2011: 267).

It becomes clear that, despite Mark being Danny's best friend, the creature Danny has transitioned into is unrecognisable. King attributes this to having "lain in the darkness too long", referring simultaneously to physical darkness of the grave and the spiritual darkness of vampirism. Danny is then described as an "evil little boy" who "hissed" at Mark (King 2011: 267), illustrating again his detachment from his humanity. Furthermore, due to the snake historically being associated with and represented as evil, the onomatopoeic hissing further entrenches the depravity of Danny as an evil creature. King continues with the non-human comparisons, describing Danny's physical stance: "the head cocked, doglike, the upper lip curled away from those shining canines" (2011: 268). Danny is compared to a hungry dog – a predator but also simply a loyal servant carrying out his master's (Barlow) orders. The shining canines tie together the venom of the vampiric condition that could have infected Mark (much like a snake's bite also infects) and the harmful bite of a rabid dog. However, when Mark attempts to injure Danny using the plastic cross, a symbol of good rather than evil, King writes:

The smile of triumph on the Glick-thing's mouth became a yawning grimace of agony. Smoke spurted from the pallid flesh, and for just a moment, before the creature twisted away and half dived, half fell out the window, Mark felt the flesh yield like smoke (2011: 269).



Being emphasised again is the fact that Danny Glick is no longer a human – he is a “Glick-thing”, a remnant or aberration of the Danny Glick that once existed, an uncanny doppelgänger, if you may. Dimitris Vardoulakis’ explanation that “the doppelgänger has been commonly viewed as an aberration” or “stencil [...] of the self” that is “defective, disjunct, split (and) threatening” (2006: 100), hence, comes to the fore. King draws on Danny’s liminality as neither human nor animal and neither living nor dead. Amidst his interstitial characteristics that leave the reader in a state of trepidation, the reader is made aware of one aspect of Danny’s monstrosity: he is inherently and intrinsically evil much so, in fact, that, when confronted with good, his aversion is so great that his smile turns into a grimace and he has no option but to flee. What follows is insight into the incorporeal nature of vampires. Much like Sunny is able to turn invisible and monsters such as Ekwensu are able to simply appear and disappear into thin air in Okorafor’s novel, Danny is described as being able to simply turn into smoke and disappear. Cohen’s thesis that the monster does not die, but simply disappears, to be born in a different place and at a different time comes to mind (1996: 4) and, with it, so too does an uncanny, eerie feeling. The reader is no longer simply afraid of Danny Glick as a vampire, but is terrified of his reemergence, which is awaited with bated breath as the inevitability of his return is a convention of the horror genre.

In conclusion, in both *Salem’s Lot* and *What Sunny Saw In The Flames*, liminality is a key trope that allows for the monstrous to create ambiguity and evoke uncanniness. In *Salem’s Lot*, King’s vampires occupy a position on the very threshold of life and death, blurring boundaries between the two absolutes and perverting the ideal of life after death. The ability to manipulate their corporeal and incorporeal states further contributes to the terror the vampires evoke. In addition, King’s characterisation of Danny Glick, a preteen in his liminal phase of development transitioning from childhood to adulthood, creates further ambiguity as the reader is neither introduced to an innocent child nor to an evil adult, but to a monster whom they initially cannot reconcile as either good or evil. As is the premise of the horror genre, King evokes terror and trepidation in the reader, finally depicting Danny Glick – and all the other vampires of the novel – as inherently evil due to their vampiric conditions. Whilst the monster in horror is undoubtedly evil, the monster in fantasy operates somewhat differently. In *What Sunny Saw In The Flames*, Sunny, like Danny, is also a preteen with the propensity to manipulate her corporeal and incorporeal features. Additionally, she boasts a double-faceted persona, possessing both a human side and a Leopard Person side to her identity. Liminality, in Sunny’s case, also evokes an uncanny, ambiguous experience. However, as fantasy explores the moral line that classifies an individual as either good or evil, Sunny is not represented as quintessentially evil simply due to her monstrosity. Instead, she is able to redeem herself by using her monstrosity as a gift to help others, rather than a weapon to harm, which I would suggest vampires are predisposed to doing. It is this very dichotomy between Danny Glick and Sunny Nwazue that highlights the varied employment and operation of monsters within the horror and fantasy genres. Whilst the horror genre serves primarily to terrify and, as such, employs monsters as evil beings, fantasy serves a didactic purpose, employing monsters as metaphors for teaching lessons of bravery and using one’s abilities to aid in the triumph of good over evil.

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A Case for Indigenous African Cultures and Languages: Postcolonialism and Subalternity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* through the lens of Frantz Fanon's chapter "The Negro and Language" from *Black Skin, White Masks*

Set in the 1970s, *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2006) is a great example of postcolonial writing, especially as it relates to the different classes of characters created in the aftermath of colonized rule and their unique relationships with each other as depicted in the novel. For example, Ugwu's master, Odenigbo, belongs to an elite societal class of well-to-do, western-educated 'university men and women', while Ugwu, on the other hand, much like his aunty and the other house boys/girls in the story, are barely literate low-class citizens who are mostly found in menial cleaning and help jobs (Adichie 2006). This gulf in class buttresses a point Frantz Fanon (1986) made in his chapter "The Negro and Language" in *Black Skin, White Masks* when he implied that western-educated blacks are oftentimes proportionately whiter in their ways than the whites themselves, attributing this to the acquisition of the white man's language and the fact that owning a language is bound to also come with the acquisition of the general way of doing things attributed to that language (Fanon 1986). Ugwu from the novel is a traditional black man from a native background, having the perfect subaltern point of view, and so he finds so many things about Odenigbo, his friends, and their ways of doing things incomprehensible, as these are western ways that are strange to his local senses (Erwin 2012).

Most of the examples given as Ugwu first steps into this new world are rather comical, from the realization that his master eats meat every day, to the sky blue painting of the buildings, to 'the white thing' or 'the cold barn' (the fridge), to the tap in the kitchen sink, etc (Adichie 2006). There are also Odenigbo's educated friends (some of whom are foreigners) and their unusual ways, the intellectual arguments, the big grammar, and even the stacks of books that litter Odenigbo's house (Adichie 2006). A more sobering example, however, is the description Ugwu's aunty gave him of university women, and how they kept framed pictures of their university days in places like Ibadan, Britain, and America on their shelves; how they had eggs with barely cooked yolks that danced around in their plates for breakfast; how they wore bouncy straight-hair wigs and maxi-dresses that grazed their ankles; and perhaps more pointedly, how most of them had gone bald and had to resort to wigs because they had used hot combs to straighten their hair so they could look like white people, only for the process to burn off their hair (Adichie 2006). For the aunty who gives this description, Adichie interestingly adds a repertoire of experience she has around these university women so as to make the description solidly convincing not only to Ugwu, but also to the readers (Erwin 2012). This is classic evidence of postcolonial writing.

In his chapter, Fanon (1986) described every colonized group of people as having an inferiority complex created in their soul by the death and burial of their cultural originality. This is a statement that does not immediately ring true when one listens to the conversations of Odenigbo and his educated friends, especially with topics bordering on Pan-Africanism and the liberation of African people, but when one takes a deeper look at the other elements at play, like the language in which the conversations are being held, the mannerisms, the choice of drinks (Golden Guinea beer, Coke, Fanta, and brandy), and even the style of entertainment through Okeoma's poetry, one would notice that they are western elements that have replaced the traditional ways that are consistent with the origins of these people (Adichie 2006). Odenigbo, particularly, still spices up his speeches with Igbo, his local dialect, but his primary mode of communication is English, and his Igbo sounds strange and diluted to Ugwu's traditional ears. Odenigbo still breaks kolanut for guests like traditional Igbo people, but when it comes to cheering with those guests, it is still the strangeness of clinking beer bottles and glasses that seem the most appropriate to him. Even the topics being cheered to, from a black American being led into a University in Mississippi, to another about the world's first woman prime minister, and yet another



speaking about Cubans beating Americans at their own game, all topics that ordinarily will not concern a traditional Igbo man who does not have western influences embedded so deep within his person. Odenigbo still identifies primarily as Igbo, to the extent that his friends see him as a tribalist, but Ugwu, who is Igbo in every sense of the word, cannot relate to him as other Igbo men from back in his village (Adichie 2006). Odenigbo's strangeness through traditional Igbo eyes is succinctly portrayed in Ugwu's aunty's description of him: "Master was a little crazy; he had spent too many years reading books overseas, talked to himself in his office, did not always return greetings, and had too much hair" (Adichie 2006: 3). As much as Odenigbo still recognizes and identifies with his Igbo roots, the truth is that he is first a westernized man if one takes his language, appearance, mode of dressing, mannerisms, et cetera, into cognizance, and this means that his cultural originality has first died for this new way of life to become his identity (Adichie 2006). This is, without doubt, evidence of the inferiority complex that Fanon references as being created in the soul of every colonized group of people (Sawyer 2011).

Since there are primarily two classes of people in Adichie's (2006) narration, it is important to also look at how Fanon's statement relates to the subaltern in the person of Ugwu. Surprisingly (or perhaps not), the inferiority complex is much easier to spot here, and this is because Ugwu practically worships his master, Odenigbo, and even though he finds these foreign ways of Odenigbo strange, he play-acts them when he is by himself, sitting in Odenigbo's chair, imagining himself speaking swift English like Odenigbo, mimicking his speeches, and even mirroring his mannerisms by shifting in the chair until he is sitting on the very edge like Odenigbo usually does when he is making a serious point (Revathi and Suresh 2019). The young boy must have had several other older men around him growing up, but from the provided extract from Adichie's novel, the one person he wants to be like is the western educated Igbo man who is more western than he is Igbo. This is certainly another example of the inferiority complex.

Back to Odenigbo's character and the postcolonial effects that have moulded him into the diluted Igbo version of himself that Ugwu meets, it is important to note the internal conflict of an Igbo man who, through his education and a quest to have a better life than most who are stuck in 'traditional ways', have become more western than he is Igbo, even though in his heart, he still very much yearns to hold tight to his roots (Jayapal 2019). No statement better demonstrates this than: "I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came" (Adichie 2006: 20). For most educated people who grew up in the era of Odenigbo, it usually starts with the foreign names, and perhaps the substituting of traditional beliefs and practices for ones borrowed from their colonizers.

Today, this death of original identity is generally more widespread, especially among urban youths in formerly colonized countries. There are so many Odenigbos who may have a mindset that recognizes their traditional roots but who primarily exhibit the borrowed traits of their colonizers in terms of their appearance, their modes of dressing, their language, their choice of food, their music and general entertainment, and other aspects of their lives (Tikly 2001). Most of this is disguised under globalization, but if globalization is supposed to be the interdependence of world economies and cultures (Kolb 2021), then most colonized countries are being short-changed (or are short-changing themselves) because the only cultures that are being widely transferred across borders are those of western colonizers, with many traditional cultures and languages already lost and many more on the brink of extinction (Thomas and Thompson 2014).

As discussed, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* obviously throws up a vivid exploration of postcolonial Nigeria and two prominent societal classes in terms of the western-educated elite and the traditional subaltern through whose eyes the reader observes characters and events. Having highlighted just how conflicted Odenigbo is in his

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identity and how much several of present-day urban youths in formerly colonized countries are not any different as many have adopted lives that identify more with our colonizers than our primary roots, it is important to end on the note that globalization is a vehicle for this trend to carry on at the detriment of our traditional roots if adequate awareness and cultural reorientation are not immediately prioritized.

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